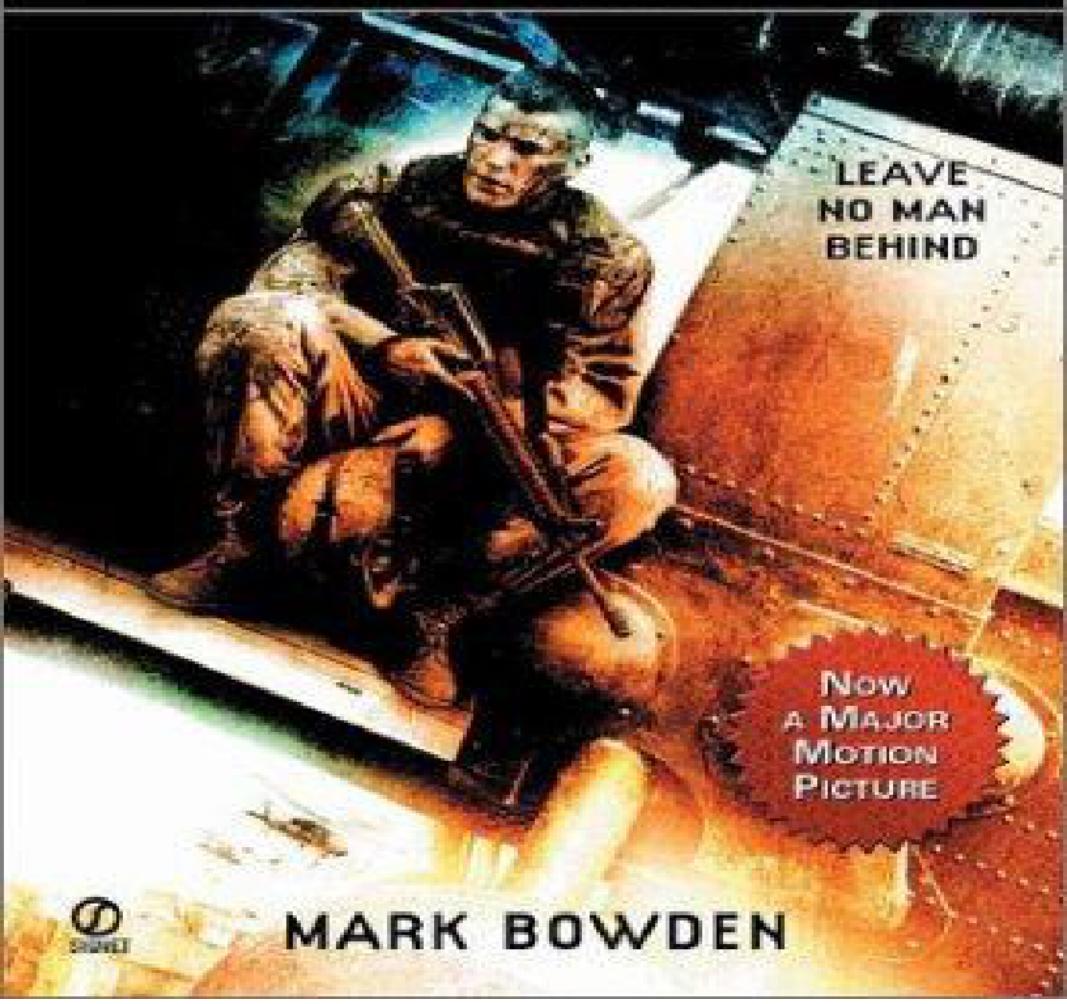
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

BLACK HAWK DOWN

A STORY OF MODERN WAR



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STAFF SGT. Matt Eversmann's lanky frame was fully extended on the rope for what seemed too long on the way down. Hanging from a hovering Blackhawk helicopter, Eversmann was a full 70 feet above the streets of Mogadishu. His goggles had broken, so his eyes chafed in the thick cloud of dust stirred up by the bird's rotors.

It was such a long descent that the thick nylon rope burned right through the palms of his leather gloves. The rest of his Chalk, his squad, had already roped in. Nearing the street, through the swirling dust below his feet, Eversmann saw one of his men stretched out on his back at the bottom of the rope.

He felt a stab of despair. Somebody's been shot already! He gripped the rope hard to keep from landing on top of the guy. It was Pvt. Todd Blackburn, at 18 the youngest Ranger in his Chalk, a kid just months out of a Florida high school. He was unconscious and bleeding from the nose and ears.

The raid was barely under way, and already something had gone wrong. It was just the first in a series of worsening mishaps that would endanger this daring mission. For Eversmann, a five-year veteran from Natural Bridge, Va., leading men into combat for the first time, it was the beginning of the longest day of his life.

Just 13 minutes before, three miles away at the Ranger's base on the Mogadishu beach, Eversmann had said a Hail Mary at liftoff. He was curled into a seat between two helicopter crew chiefs, the knees of his

long legs up around his shoulders. Before him, arrayed on both sides of the sleek UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter, was Eversmann's Chalk, a dozen men in tan, desert camouflage fatigues. He had worried about the responsibility. Twelve men. He had prayed silently during Mass at the mess hall that morning. Now he added one more.

. . . Pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

It was midafternoon, Oct. 3, 1993. Eversmann's Chalk Four was part of a company of U.S. Rangers assisting a commando squadron that was about to descend on a gathering of Habr Gidr clan leaders in the heart of Mogadishu, Somalia. This ragtag clan, led by warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, had challenged the United States of America.

Today's targets were two top Aidid lieutenants. Commandos, the nation's elite commando unit, would storm the target house and capture them. Then four helicopter loads of Rangers, including Eversmann's men, would rope down to all four corners of the target block and form a perimeter. No one would be allowed in or out.

Waiting for the code word to launch, which today was "Irene," they were a formidable armada. The helicopter assault force included about 75 Rangers and 40 Commando troops in 17 helicopters. Idling at the airport was a convoy of 12 vehicles with soldiers who would ride three miles to the target building and escort the Somali prisoners and the assault team back to base.

The swell of the revving engines had made the earth tremble. The Rangers were eager for action. Bristling with grenades and ammo, gripping the well-oiled steel of their weapons, they felt their hearts race under their flak vests. They ran through last-minute mental checklists, saying prayers, triple-checking weapons, rehearsing their choreographed moves. They had left behind canteens, bayonets, night-vision devices (NODs) - anything they felt would be dead weight on a fast daylight raid.

It was 3:32 p.m. when the lead Blackhawk pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant, announced:

"F-in' Irene."

And the swarm of black copters lifted up into an embracing blue vista of Indian Ocean and sky. They eased out across a littered strip of white sand and moved low and fast over the breakers.

Mogadishu spread beneath them in ruins. Five years of civil war had reduced the once-picturesque African port to a post-apocalyptic nightmare. The few paved avenues were crumbling and littered with mountains of trash and debris. Those walls and buildings that still stood in the heaps of gray rubble were pockmarked with bullet scars and cannon shot.

In his bird, code-named Super 67, Eversmann silently rehearsed the plan. When his Chalk Four touched the street, the boys would already be taking down the target house, arresting the Somalis inside. Then the Americans and their prisoners would board the ground convoy and roll back for a sunny Sunday afternoon on the beach.

It was the unit's sixth mission since coming to Mogadishu in late August. Now Maj. Gen. William F. Garrison, their commander, was taking a calculated risk in sending them in daylight into the Bakara Market area, a hornet's nest of Aidid supporters.

The commandos rode in on MH-6 Little Birds, choppers small enough to land in alleys or on rooftops. In the bigger Blackhawks, Rangers dangled their legs from the doorways. Others squatted on ammo cans or sat on flak-proof panels laid out on the floor. They all wore flak vests and helmets and 50 pounds of gear and ammo.

Stripped down, most Rangers looked like teenagers (their average age was 19). They were products of rigorous selection and training. They were fit and fast. With their buff bodies, distinct crew cuts - sides and back of the head shaved clean - and grunted Hooah greeting, the Rangers were among the most gung-ho soldiers in the Army.

Inside Super 67, Eversmann was anxious about being in charge. He'd won the distinction by default. His platoon sergeant had been

summoned home by an illness in his family, and the guy who replaced him had suffered an epileptic seizure.

Now, as they approached the target site, he felt more confident. They had done this dozens of times.

By the time the Blackhawks had moved down over the city, the Little Birds with the Commando troops were almost over the target. The mission could still have been aborted. But the only threat spotted was burning tires on a nearby street. Somalis often burned tires to summon militia. These, it was determined, had been set earlier in the day.

"Two minutes," came the voice of the Super 67 pilot in Eversmann's earphones.

Two advance AH-6 Little Birds armed with rockets then made their "bump," or initial pass over the target. It was 3:43 p.m.

Cameras on spy planes and orbiting helicopters relayed the scene back to commanders at the Joint Operations Center on the beach. They saw a busy Mogadishu neighborhood, in much better shape than most. The landmark was the Olympic Hotel, a five-story white building, one of the few large structures still intact in the city. Three blocks west was the teeming Bakara Market.

In front of the hotel ran Hawlwadig Road, a paved, north-south avenue crossed by narrow dirt alleys. At the intersections, drifting sand turned rust-orange in the afternoon sun.

One block up from the hotel, across Hawlwadig, was the target house. It was flat-roofed with three rear stories and two front stories. It was shaped like an L, with a small courtyard enclosed by a high stone wall. In front moved cars, people and donkey carts.

Conditioned to the noise of the copters by months of overflights, people below did not stir as two Little Birds made a first swift pass, looking for trouble. Seeing none, the four Commando Little Birds

zoomed down to Hawlwadig Road, disappearing into swirling dust as the commandos leaped from their helicopters and stormed the house. Next came the Blackhawks with the Rangers.

Eversmann's copter hovered just above the brown storm. Waiting for the three other Blackhawks, it seemed to the sergeant that they hung there for a dangerously long time. A still Blackhawk was a big target. Even over the sound of the rotor and engines the men could hear the pop of gunfire.

The 3-inch-thick nylon ropes were coiled before the doors. When they were finally pushed out, one dropped down on a car. This delayed things further. The pilot nudged his aircraft forward until the rope dragged free.

"We're a little short of our desired position," he told Eversmann. They were going in a block north of their assigned corner. Still, that wasn't crucial. The sergeant thought it would be a lot safer on the ground.

"No problem," he said.

"We're about 100 meters short," the pilot warned.

Eversmann gave him a thumbs-up. He would be the last man out.

When it was his time to jump, the strap on his goggles broke. Flustered, he tossed them and sprung for the rope, forgetting to take off his earphones. He jumped, ripping the earphone cord from the ceiling.

In the excitement, time slowed. All his movements became very deliberate. He hadn't realized how high they were. The slide down on the rope was far longer than any they'd done in training. Then, on his way down, Eversmann spotted Todd Blackburn splayed out on the street at the end of the rope.

Eversmann's feet touched down next to the fallen Ranger, and the crew chiefs in the copter released the rope. It fell twisting to the road. As the Blackhawk moved up and away, the noise eased and the dust settled. The city's musky odor bore in.

Pvt. 2 Mark Good, Chalk Four's medic, was already at work on Blackburn. The kid had one eye shut. Blood gurgled from his mouth. Good inserted a tube down Blackburn's throat to help him breathe. Sgt. First Class Bart Bullock, a Commando medic, started an IV. Blackburn hadn't been shot, he'd fallen. He'd somehow missed the rope and plummeted.

He was still alive, but unconscious. He looked pretty busted up. Eversmann stepped away. He took a quick count of his Chalk.

His men had peeled off as planned against the mud-stained stone walls on either side of the street. That left Eversmann in the middle of the road with Blackburn and the medics. It was hot, and sand was caked in his eyes, nose and ears. They were taking fire, but it wasn't very accurate. Oddly, it hadn't even registered with the sergeant. You would think bullets clipping past would command your attention, but he'd been too preoccupied.

Now he noticed. Passing bullets made a snapping sound, like cracking a stick of dry hickory. Eversmann had never been shot at before. As big a target as he made at 6-foot-4, he figured he'd better find cover. He and the two medics grabbed Blackburn under his arms, and, trying to keep his neck straight, dragged him to the edge of the street. They squatted behind two parked cars.

Good looked up at Eversmann. "He's litter urgent, Sarge. We need to extract him right now or he's going to die."

Eversmann shouted to his radio operator, Pvt. Jason Moore, and asked him to raise Capt. Mike Steele on the company radio net. Steele, the Ranger commander, had roped in with two lieutenants and the rest of Chalk One to the block's southeast corner.

Minutes passed. Moore shouted back to say he couldn't get Steele.

"What do you mean you can't get him?" Eversmann asked.

Neither man had noticed that a bullet had severed the wire leading to the antenna on Moore's radio. Eversmann tried his walkie-talkie. Again Steele didn't answer, but after several tries Steele's lieutenant, Larry Perino, came on the line.

The sergeant made a particular effort to speak slowly and clearly. He explained that Blackburn had fallen and was badly injured. He needed to come out. Eversmann tried to convey urgency without alarm.

So when Perino said, "Calm down," it really burned Eversmann. This is one hell of a time to start sharpshooting me.

Fire was getting heavier. To officers watching on screens in the command center, it was as if their men had poked a stick into a hornet's nest. It was an amazing and unnerving thing to view a battle in real time. Cameras on the surveillance aircraft circling high over the fight captured crowds of Somalis erecting barricades and lighting tires to summon help. People were pouring into the streets, many with weapons. They were racing from all directions toward the spot where orbiting helicopters marked the fight. There wasn't much the Joint Operating Command could do but watch.

Eversmann's men had fanned out and were shooting in every direction except south toward the target building. He saw crowds of Somalis way up Hawlwadig to the north, and others, closer, darting in and out of alleys, taking shots at the Rangers. They were coming closer, wary of the Americans' guns.

The Rangers had been issued strict rules of engagement. They were to shoot only at someone who pointed a weapon at them, but already this was getting unrealistic. Those with guns were intermingled with women and children. The Somalis were strange that way. Whenever there was a disturbance in Mogadishu, people would throng to the

spot: men, women, children - even the aged and infirm. It was like some national imperative to bear witness. And over this summer, the Ranger missions had stirred up widespread hatred.

Things were not playing out according to the script in Eversmann's head. His Chalk was still in the wrong place. He'd figured they could just hoof it down Hawlwadig, but Blackburn's falling and the unexpected volume of gunfire had ruled that out.

Time played tricks. It would be hard to explain to someone who wasn't there. Events seemed to happen twice normal speed, but from inside his personal space, the place where he thought and reacted and watched, every second seemed a minute long. He had no idea how much time had gone by. It was hard to believe things could have gone so much to hell in such a short time.

He kept checking back to see if the ground convoy had moved up. He knew it was probably too soon. It would mean that things were wrapping up. He must have looked a dozen times before he saw the first humvee - the wide-bodied vehicle that replaced the jeep as the Army's all-purpose ground vehicle - round the corner three blocks down. What a relief! Maybe the boys are done and we can roll out of here.

He radioed Lt. Perino.

"Listen, we really need to move this guy or he's going to die. Can't you send somebody down the street?"

No, the humvees, could not move to his position.

Good, the medic, spoke up: "Listen, Sarge, we've got to get him out."

Eversmann summoned two of Chalk Four's sergeants, rock-solid Casey Joyce and 6-foot-5 Jeff McLaughlin. He addressed McLaughlin, shouting over the escalating noise of the fight.

"Sergeant, you need to move him down to those humvees, toward the target."

They unfolded a compact litter, and with Joyce and McLaughlin in front and medics Good and Bullock in back, they took off down the street. They ran stooped. Bullock was still holding the IV bag connected to the kid's arm. McLaughlin didn't think Blackburn was going to make it. On the litter he was dead weight, still bleeding from the nose and mouth. They were all yelling at him, "Hang on! Hang on!" but, by the look of him, he had already let go.

They would run a few steps, put Blackburn down, shoot, then pick him up and carry him a few more steps, then put him down again.

"We've got to get those humvees to come to us," Good said finally. "We keep picking him up and putting him down like this and we're going to kill him."

So Joyce volunteered to fetch a humvee. He took off running on his own.

AFTER THE HELICOPTER force had moved out over the beach, Staff Sgt. Jeff Struecker had waited several minutes in his humvee with the rest of the ground convoy at the base. His was the lead in a column of 12 vehicles. They were to drive to a point behind the Olympic Hotel and wait for the D-boys to wrap things up in the target house, which was just a five-minute drive from the base.

Struecker, a born-again Christian from Fort Dodge, Iowa, knew Mogadishu better than most guys at the compound. His platoon had driven out on water runs and other details daily. The stench was what hit him first. Garbage was strewn everywhere. People burned trash on the streets. They were always burning tires. They burned animal dung for fuel. That added to the mix.

In this African city people spent their days lounging outside their shabby rag huts and tin shacks. There were gold-toothed women in colorful robes and old men in loose, cotton skirts and worn, plastic sandals. When the Rangers searched the men, they would often find wads of the addictive khat plant they chewed to get high. When they grinned their teeth were stained black and orange. In some parts of town the men would shake their fists at the Rangers as they drove past.

It was hard to imagine what interest the United States of America had in such a place. But Struecker was just 24, a soldier, and it wasn't his place to question such things. Today his job was to roll up in force on Hawlwadig Road, load up Somali prisoners, the Commando teams and the Rangers, and bring them back out.

He had three men in his vehicle: Spec. Derek Velasco, Spec. Tim Moynihan and a company favorite, Sgt. Dominick Pilla. Dom Pilla was a big, powerful kid from Vineland, N.J. - he had that Joy-zee accent - who used his hands a lot when he talked. Pilla was just born funny. He loved practical jokes. He had bought tiny charges that he stuck in guys' cigarettes. They'd explode with a startling Pop! about halfway through a smoke. Most people who tried that kind of thing were annoying, but people laughed along with Pilla. His cutting impression of Capt. Steele was a highlight of the little skits the Rangers sometimes put on in the hangar.

Struecker and the rest of the column timed their departure so they wouldn't arrive at the hotel before the assault on the target house had begun. Then they immediately got lost. Struecker, who was leading the convoy, took a wrong turn and watched with alarm as the rest of the vehicles drove in a different direction. He'd found his way back, but only after the rest of the vehicles had already moved up to the target house to load prisoners.

One of the humvees in the column held a group of Commando soldiers and Navy SEALs, that service's elite commando unit. They raced on ahead of the convoy to join the assault force, which had found 24 Somalis in the house and were handcuffing them. As this humvee approached the house, SEAL John Gay heard a shot and felt a hard impact on his right hip. He cried out. Master Sgt. Tim "Grizz" Martin, a commando in Gay's humvee, tore open Gay's pants and

examined his hip, then gave Gay good news. The round had hit smack on the SEAL's knife. It had shattered the blade, but the knife had deflected the bullet. Martin pulled several bloody fragments of blade out of Gay's hip, and bandaged it. Gay limped out, took cover, and began returning fire.

In the mounting gunfire, they were startled to see a Ranger running toward them down Hawlwadig Road. It was Casey Joyce. He quickly explained Blackburn's condition, and pointed back to where the others were waiting. He jumped into the humvee, and they drove up a block to where the young private waited on the litter with Sgt. McLaughlin and the two medics.

They set Blackburn in the back of the SEAL humvee and got permission to take him back to the base immediately.

Struecker and his companion humvee had just found their way back to the main convoy and were ordered to escort the SEAL humvee. It had no big gun on top. Struecker's had a 50-caliber machine gun, and his companion humvee had a Mark 19, which could rapidly fire big, grenade-like rounds. The three-vehicle column began racing back to base through streets now alive with gunfire and explosion.

This time Struecker knew which way to go. He had mapped a return route that was simple. Several blocks south of Hawlwadig was a main road that would take them all the way down to the beach, where they could turn right and drive straight into the base.

But things had worsened. Armed street fighters were sprinkled into the crowds of civilians. Roadblocks and barricades had been erected. The humvees drove around and through them, with Struecker in the front vehicle and Blackburn in the middle humvee. Good, the medic, was holding up the IV bag for him with one hand while firing his rifle with the other.

They started taking fire. A Ranger in Blackburn's humvee shot down two Somali gunmen who ran right up to the rear of the vehicle as they moved past an alley. At every intersection came a hail of rounds. People were shooting from rooftops and from windows and from all

directions.

Up in Struecker's humvee, he instructed his M-60 gunner, Dom Pilla, to concentrate all his fire to the right, and to leave everything to the left to the 50-caliber. They didn't want to drive too fast, because a violently bumpy ride couldn't do Blackburn any good.

Pilla wheeled his gun toward a Somali standing on the street just a few feet away. They both fired at the same time, and both fell. A round tore into Pilla's forehead and the exit wound blew blood and brain out the back of his skull. His body flopped over into the lap of Spec. Tim Moynihan, who cried out in horror.

"Pilla's hit!" he screamed.

Just then, over the radio, came the voice of Sgt. First Class Bob Gallagher, leader of the vehicle platoon.

How things going?

Struecker ignored the radio, and shouted back over his shoulder at Moynihan.

"Calm down! What's wrong with him?" Struecker couldn't see all the way to the back hatch.

"He's dead!" Moynihan shouted.

"How do you know he's dead? Are you a medic?" Struecker asked.

Struecker turned for a quick look over his shoulder and saw that the whole rear of his vehicle was splattered red.

"He's shot in the head! He's dead!" Moynihan screamed.

"Just calm down," Struecker pleaded. ``We've got to keep fighting until we get back."

To hell with driving carefully. Struecker told his driver to step on it, and he hoped the others would follow. They were close to National Street, a main east/west highway. Struecker saw rocket-propelled grenades flying across the street now. It seemed as if the whole city was shooting at them. They drove wildly now, shooting at both sides of the street.

Inside Struecker's humvee, Sgt. Gallagher's voice came across the radio again.

How's it going?

"I don't want to talk about it," Struecker said into the radio.

Gallagher didn't like that answer.

You got any casualties?

"Yeah. One."

Struecker tried to leave it at that. So far nobody on their side had been killed, as far as he knew, and he didn't want to be the one to put news like that on the air. Men in battle drink up information as if downing water; it becomes more important than water. Unlike most of these guys, Struecker had been to war before, in Panama and the Persian Gulf, and he knew soldiers fought a lot better when things were going their way. Once things turned, it was real hard to reassert control. People panic. It was happening to Moynihan and the other guys in his humvee right now. Panic was a virus.

Who is he and what's his status? Gallagher demanded.

"It's Pilla."

What's his status?

Struecker held the microphone for a moment, debating with himself, and then reluctantly answered:

"He's dead!"

At the sound of that word, all radio traffic stopped. For many long seconds afterward, there was silence.

Chapter 2

Dazed, blood-spattered and frantic

WITH BADLY INJURED Pfc. Todd Blackburn on board, the little convoy sped out of the treacherous side streets of Mogadishu to a wide road, and for a stretch the firing abated. As they approached the sea, well south of the target building, the road was mobbed with Somalis. In the lead humvee, Staff Sgt. Jeff Struecker's heart sank. How was he going to get his three humvees back to base through all these people?

His driver slowed to a crawl and leaned on the horn. Struecker told him to keep moving. He threw out loud but harmless flash-bang grenades. Then he told his 50-gunner to open up over people's heads.

The sound of the big gun scattered most of the people, and the column sped up again. They may have run over some people. Struecker didn't look back to see.

About three miles north, near the Olympic Hotel, the commandos had 24 Somalian prisoners handcuffed and ready for loading on the main ground convoy. Among them were the primary targets of the raid, two Somalian clan leaders.

Struecker's three-vehicle convoy had left to get emergency treatment

for Blackburn, a young Ranger who had fallen out of a helicopter. On the way they'd been badly shot up. In the back of Struecker's humvee, Sgt. Dominick Pilla had been shot dead.

Now they came up behind a slow-moving pickup truck with people hanging off the back. It would not pull over, so Struecker told his driver to ram it. A man with his leg hanging off the back screamed as the humvee hit. As the truck veered off the road, the man curled into the back bed, clutching his leg.

They passed through the gates of the beachfront American compound with a tremendous sense of relief and exhaustion. They had run the gauntlet. Dazed and blood-splattered, they piled out. Struecker had expected to find the calm safety of the home base. Instead, the scene was frantic. People were racing around on the tarmac. He heard a commander's voice on the speaker box, shouting, "Pay attention to what's going on and listen to my orders!"

It smelled like panic. Something had happened.

The medical people ran to the middle humvee to get Blackburn, who was on his way to a long and difficult recovery. They didn't know about Pilla.

Struecker grabbed one as he went past.

"Look, there's a dead in the back of my vehicle; you need to get him off."

BACK IN THE CITY, at Staff Sgt. Matt Eversmann's intersection, things continued to go wrong for Chalk Four. First Blackburn had fallen out of the helicopter. Then they had roped in well off target. And now they were pinned down on Hawlwadig Road, a block north of their proper position at the northwest corner of the target block.

Two of Eversmann's men, Sgt. Scott Galentine and Sgt. Jim Telscher, were crouched behind cars across the street. For some reason, the steady gunfire didn't frighten Galentine. It turned him giddy. He was goofing with Telscher, making faces and grinning, as rounds kicked up dirt between them, shattering the windows and blowing out the tires of the cars. Telscher was a sight. He had blood smeared on his face, having accidentally smacked himself with his rifle coming down the fast rope.

Galentine was a 21-year-old sergeant from Xenia, Ohio, who had

gotten bored working at a rubber plant. Now he was pointing his M-16 at people down the street, aiming at center mass, and squeezing off rounds. People would drop, just like silhouettes at target practice.

When they started catching rounds from a different direction, Galentine and Telscher ran to an alley. There, Galentine came face to face with a Somalian woman. She was staring up at Galentine and trying to open a door. His first instinct had been to shoot. The woman's eyes were wide with terror. It startled him, that moment. It cut through his silliness. This wasn't a game. He had been very close to killing this woman. She got the door open and stepped inside.

Galentine took cover behind another car, his gun braced against his shoulder. He was picking targets out of the hundreds of Somalis moving toward them.

As he fired, he felt a painful slap on his left hand that knocked his weapon so hard it spun completely around him. His first thought was to right his gun, but when he reached out he saw that his left thumb was lying on his forearm, attached by a strip of skin.

He picked up his thumb and tried to press it back to his hand.

Telscher called to him. "You all right, Scotty? You all right?"

Sgt. Eversmann had seen it, the M-16 spinning and a splash of pink by Galentine's left hand. He had seen Galentine reach for the thumb, then look across the road at him.

"Don't come across!" Eversmann shouted. There was withering fire coming down the road. "Don't come across!"

Galentine heard the sergeant but started running anyway. He seemed to be getting nowhere, as if in a dream. His feet seemed heavy and slow. He dived the last few feet.

The sergeant was still contending with the crowd. Men would dart out into the street and spray bursts from their AK-47s, then take cover. Eversmann saw the flash and puff of smoke of rocket-propelled grenades being launched their way. The grenades came wobbling through the air and exploded with a long splash of flame and a pounding concussion. The heat would wash over and leave the odor of powder.

At one point, such a great wave of fire from Somalis tore down the road that it created a shock wave of noise and energy that Eversmann

could actually see coming. They had expected some resistance on this raid, but nothing like this.

When one of the big Blackhawks flew over, Eversmann stood and stretched his long arm to the north, directing them to the Somalian gunmen. He watched the crew chief in back, sitting behind his minigun, and then saw the gun spout lines of flame at targets up the street. For a few minutes, all shooting from that direction stopped.

To Eversmann's left, Pvt. 2 Anton Berendsen was prone on the ground and firing his M203, a rifle with a grenade-launching tube under the barrel. Seconds after Galentine had dived in, Berendsen turned and grabbed his shoulder.

"Oh, my God, I'm hit," Berendsen said. He looked up at Eversmann.

Berendsen scooted over against the wall next to Galentine with one arm limp at his side, picking small chunks of debris from his face.

Eversmann squatted next to both men, turning first to Berendsen, who was still preoccupied, looking down the alley.

"Ber, tell me where you're hurt," Eversmann said.

"I think I got one in the arm."

With his good hand, Berendsen was fumbling with the breech of his grenade launcher. Eversmann impatiently reached down and opened it.

"There's a guy right down there," Berendsen said.

As Eversmann struggled to lift Berendsen's vest and open his shirt to assess the wound, the private shot off a 203 round one-handed. The sergeant could see the fist-sized round spiraling toward a tin shack 40 meters away. When it hit, the shack vanished in a great flash of light and smoke.

Berendsen's injury did not look severe. Eversmann turned to Galentine, who looked wide-eyed, as if he might be lapsing into shock. His left thumb was hanging down below his hand.

Eversmann grabbed the thumb and placed it in the dazed sergeant's palm.

"Scott, hold this," he said. "Just put your hand up and hold it, buddy."

Galentine gripped the thumb with his fingers.

Sgt. First Class Glenn Harris came running up to tend the wound. When he saw Galentine's thumb, he dropped the field dressing to the ground. Galentine reached into Harris' kit with his good hand, removed a clean dressing, and handed it to him. His injured hand stung. It felt the way it did on a cold day when you hit a baseball wrong.

"Don't worry, Sgt. Galentine, you're going be OK," Berendsen said.

With Berendsen hurt, Eversmann had only Spec. Dave Diemer covering the alley to the east with his SAW (squad automatic weapon). Diemer was a boisterous 22-year-old from Newburgh, N.Y., and the company's arm-wrestling champ. Eversmann kneeled beside Diemer behind a car and fired his M-16. It occurred to Eversmann that this was the first shot he'd fired.

It was hectic. Eversmann tried to stay calm. This was his first time in charge. He had three Rangers injured, one critically, and he'd managed to get him out. Neither Galentine's nor Berendsen's wounds were life-threatening.

Glass shattered and showered on Eversmann and Diemer. A Somali had run out to the middle of Hawlwadig Road, just a few yards away, and opened up on the car. Diemer dived down behind the rear wheel on the passenger side and shot him with a quick burst. The Somali fell over backward in a rumpled heap.

Eversmann radioed to First Lt. Larry Perino, the Chalk One commander, that he had taken two more casualties.

From across the street, Sgt. Telscher shouted, "Sgt. Eversmann! Snodgrass has been shot!"

Spec. Kevin Snodgrass, the machine gunner, had been crouched behind a car hulk and a round had evidently skipped off the car or ricocheted up from the road. Eversmann saw Telscher stoop over Snodgrass to tend to the wound. The machine gunner was not screaming. It didn't look too dire.

"Sarge?"

Eversmann turned wearily to Diemer.

"A helicopter just crashed."

Chapter 3

A terrifying scene, then a big crash

ABDIAZIZ ALI ADEN heard the American helicopters coming in low, so low that the big tree that stood in the central courtyard of his stone house was uprooted and knocked over. Aden was 18 but looked five years younger, a slip of a man with thick, bushy hair.

Aden rushed outside when the helicopters passed over. He heard shooting to the west, near Hawlwadig, the big road that passed before the Olympic Hotel three blocks west. Aden ran toward the noise. The sky was dark with smoke.

The air around Aden sizzled and cracked with gunfire. Above him were helicopters, some with lines of flame spitting from their guns. He ran two blocks with his head down until he saw several big American trucks and humvees, with machine guns mounted on them, shooting everywhere.

The Rangers wore body armor and helmets with goggles. Aden could see no part of them that looked human. They were like futuristic warriors from an American movie. People were running madly, hiding from them. There was a line of Somalian men in handcuffs being loaded onto big trucks. On the street were dead people and a dead donkey splayed out in front of its water cart.

The scene terrified Aden. As he ran back to his house, one of the Blackhawk helicopters flew over him at rooftop level. It made a rackety blast, and wash from its rotors swept over the dusty alley like a violent storm. Through this dust, Aden saw a Somalian militiaman carrying a rocket-propelled grenade launcher - an RPG - step into the alley and drop to one knee.

The militiaman waited until the copter had passed overhead. Then he leaned the RPG up and fired at the aircraft from behind. Aden saw a great flash from the back end of the launcher and then saw the grenade explode into the rear of the helicopter, cracking the tail.

The body of the aircraft started to spin, so close to Aden that he could see the pilot inside struggling at the controls. The pilot could not hold it, and the helicopter started to flip. It was tilted slightly toward Aden

when it hit the roof of his house with a loud, crunching sound, and then slammed on its side into the alley with a great, scraping crash in a thick cloud of dust and rock and smoke.

The helicopter had destroyed part of Aden's house; he feared his family had been killed. He ran to the crash and found his parents and eight brothers and sisters trapped under a big sheet of tin roof. They had stepped outside and were standing against the west wall when the helicopter hit and the roof came down on them. They were not badly hurt. Aden worked his way past the crashed helicopter, which had fallen to the alley sideways so that the bottom of it faced him. He helped pull the roof off his parents and brothers and sisters. Afraid that the helicopter would explode, they all ran across a wide, rutted dirt road to a friend's house three doors up. There they waited.

There were no flames and no explosion. Soon Aden came back to guard his house. In Mogadishu, if you left your house open and undefended, it would quickly be looted.

Smoke had stopped rising from the helicopter when he returned. He ran into his house and stood in the courtyard by the uprooted tree and saw that the wall where the helicopter had crashed was gone; it was just a heap of stones and dusty mortar.

Then, standing inside his house, Aden saw a wounded American soldier climb out of the crumpled machine, and then another American with an M-16. Aden turned and ran back out a side door and hid behind an old white Volkswagen on the dirt street. He slipped down and crawled under it, curling himself up into a ball, trying to make himself small.

When the American with the gun rounded the corner he saw Aden under the car. Seeing that Aden had no weapon, the soldier moved on. But first he stopped alongside the car - Aden could have reached out and touched the soldier's boots - and pointed his gun at a Somalian man armed with an M-16 across the street from the car.

The two men fired at the same time but neither fell. They went to shoot again but the Somali's gun jammed and the American didn't shoot. He ran closer, over to a wall across the road, then fired. The bullet made a hole in the Somali's forehead, and he toppled. The American ran over and shot him three more times as he lay there.

Then a big Somalian woman came running from a narrow alley, right

in front of the soldier. Startled, he quickly fired his weapon. The woman fell face forward, dropping like a sack, without putting out her arms to break the fall.

More Somalis came now, with guns, shooting at the American. He dropped to one knee and shot many of them, but the Somalis' bullets also hit him.

Then a helicopter landed right on Freedom Road, the street in front of Aden's house. It seemed impossible that a helicopter could fit in so narrow a street. It was a Little Bird, the Americans' fast, tiny and highly maneuverable copter. Its rotor blades were just inches from the walls of Aden's house and the house directly across the road. The roar of the helicopter was deafening, and dust swirled around. Aden couldn't breathe. Then the shooting got worse.

One of the airmen was leaning out of the helicopter and aiming his gun up the street behind where Aden was hiding. Another airman ran from the helicopter toward the Blackhawk that had crashed. The shooting got even worse then. It was so loud that the sound of the helicopter and the guns was just one continuous explosion. Bullets were hitting and rocking the old car that was shielding Aden. He curled himself into a ball and wished he was someplace else.

AT THE JOINT OPERATIONS Center next to the airport, cameras on three surveillance helicopters had captured close-up and in color the crash of the helicopter, code-named Super 61. Maj. Gen. William F. Garrison and his command staff had watched it live: pilot Cliff Wolcott's black chopper moving smoothly, then a shudder and puff of smoke near the tail rotor, then an awkward counter-rotation as Super 61 fell, making two slow turns clockwise, nose up until its belly bit the top of a stone building and its front end was cast down violently, rotors snapped and flying, its fuselage smashing into a narrow alley on its side against a stone wall in a cloud of smoke, dust and debris.

There wasn't enough time for anyone to consider all the ramifications of that helicopter's sudden end, but the sick, sinking feeling that came over officers watching on screen went far beyond the immediate fate of the six men on board.

America's 10-month mission to Somalia, handed off by one president to another, the latest symbol of the nation's commitment to a New World Order, had just taken a crippling hit. The ambitious nation-

building hopes of United Nations bureaucrats were lying in a twisted hunk of smoldering metal, plastic and flesh in an alley in northern Mogadishu.

Chapter 4

An outgunned but relentless enemy

AFTER ROPING DOWN from their Blackhawk, the Rangers on Chalk One fanned out around the southeast corner of the target house in Mogadishu.

As far as Chalk One knew, things were going well. The mission had been quieter for them than for the Rangers one block west on Hawlwadig Road. But now gunfire was picking up, and in a matter of minutes Cliff Wolcott's Blackhawk would be shot down just five blocks away.

The Chalk One men were hunkered down, taking cover from Somalis at an intersection of dirt alleys. Both alleys were deeply rutted and littered with debris.

Dirt popped up all around Ranger Sgts. Mike Goodale and Aaron Williamson, who were crouched behind the rusted hulk of a burned-out car. A Somali with an AK-47 leaned out from behind a corner and rattled a burst.

Goodale hopped and ran, but there was no safe place to hide. He dived behind a pipe protruding from the road. It was only 7 inches wide and 6 inches high. He felt ridiculous cowering behind it. When the shooting ceased momentarily, he rejoined Williamson behind the car, just as the Somali opened up again.

Goodale saw a spray of bullets walk up the side of the car and down the side of Williamson's rifle, taking off the end of his finger. Blood splashed up on Williamson's face and he began screaming and cursing.

"If he sticks his head out again I'm taking him," he told Goodale.

Severed fingertip and all, Williamson coolly leveled his M-16 and waited, motionless. Bullets were still snapping around them.

When the shooter showed his face again, Williamson fired. There was a spray of blood, and the man fell over hard. With his uninjured hand, Williamson exchanged a high five with Goodale.

Moments later, another Somali sprinted away from them. As he ran, his loose shirt billowed out to reveal an AK-47, so Goodale and Williamson shot him. As the man lay on the street, Goodale asked Chalk One's medic if they should check him out. The medic shook his head and said, "No, he's dead."

That startled Goodale. He had just killed a man. Only two years earlier, he had been partying hard at the University of Iowa, flunking out and joining the Rangers. His two years with the Rangers had been mostly a great time. Soldiering was fun. This was something else. The man had not actually been shooting at him when he fired, so was it right to shoot? Goodale stared at the man in the dirt, his clothes tangled around him, splayed awkwardly in the alley.

Across the alley, Chalk One's commander, First Lt. Larry Perino, a stocky West Point man, was watching Somalian children walk right up the street toward his men, pointing out the Americans' positions for a hidden gunman. His men threw flash-bang grenades, which scattered the children momentarily.

Perino sprayed rounds from his M-16 at their feet. They ran away again.

Then a woman began creeping toward Staff Sgt. Chuck Elliott's M-60 machine gun, which the men called a ``pig'' because of the grunting sound it made when fired.

"Hey, sir, I can see there's a guy behind this woman with a weapon under her arm!" Elliott shouted.

Perino told Elliott to fire. The 60-gun made its low, blatting sound. The man and the woman fell dead.

ONE BLOCK NORTH, at the northeast corner of the target block, were the Rangers in Chalk Two. Spec. Shawn Nelson, the unit's 60-gunner, set up his ``pig'' at the crest of a slight rise in the road.

At 23, Nelson was a little older than his buddies. When the corporate training program he attended after high school in Atlanta abruptly folded, he had enlisted. He felt protective of his fellow Rangers, and

not just because of his big gun. They were the first real family he had ever had.

He could see Somalis aiming guns at the southwest corner of the target block, where Chalk Three had roped in. One Somali, an old man with a bushy white afro, was so intent that he didn't run like the others when Nelson fired.

"Shoot him, shoot him," urged Nelson's assistant gunner.

"No, watch," Nelson said. "He'll come right to us."

Sure enough, the man practically walked up to them. He ducked behind a tree 50 yards up and was loading a new magazine in his weapon when Nelson put about a dozen rounds into him. The bullets went right through the man, chipping the wall behind him, but still he got up, retrieved his weapon, and fired again. Nelson was shocked. He squeezed another burst. The man managed to crawl behind the tree. This time he didn't shoot back.

"I think you got him," said his assistant gunner.

But Nelson could still see the afro moving behind the tree. He blasted another long burst. Bark splintered off the tree and the man slumped sideways. His body was quivering and he seemed to have at last expired. Nelson could not believe how hard it was to kill a man.

Taking cover next behind a small car, Nelson saw a Somali with a gun prone on the dirt between two kneeling women. He had the barrel of his weapon between the women's legs, and there were four children actually sitting on him. He was completely shielded by noncombatants.

"Check this out, John," Nelson told Spec. John Waddell.

"What do you want to do?" Waddell asked.

Nelson threw a flash-bang at the group, and they fled so fast the man left his gun.

Crouching nearby, Staff Sgt. Ed Yurek's attention was called to a nearby tin-walled shed.

"Hey, we've got people in the shed!" shouted Chalk Two's medic.

Yurek sprinted across the street, and, with the medic, plunged into the

shed, nearly trampling a huddled mass of terrified children. With them was a woman, evidently their teacher.

"Everyone down!" Yurek shouted, his weapon ready.

The children wailed, and Yurek realized he needed to throttle things back.

"Settle down," he pleaded. "Settle down!" But the wailing continued.

Slowly, Yurek stooped and placed his weapon on the ground. He motioned for the teacher to approach him. He guessed she was a young teenager.

"Lay down," he told her, speaking evenly. "Lay down," gesturing with his hands.

She lay down, hesitantly. Yurek pointed to the children, gesturing for them to do the same. They got down. Yurek retrieved his weapon and addressed the teacher, enunciating every word, vainly trying to bridge the language barrier. "Now, you need to stay here. No matter what you see or hear, stay here."

She shook her head, and Yurek hoped that meant yes. As they left, Yurek told the medic to guard the door. He feared somebody would barge in shooting.

Up the alley, Nelson saw a man with a weapon ride out into the open - on a cow. There were about eight other men around the animal, some with weapons. Nelson didn't know whether to laugh or shoot. In an instant, he and the rest of the Rangers opened fire. The man on the cow fell off, and the others ran. The cow stood stupefied.

Just then, a Blackhawk slid overhead and opened up with a minigun. The cow literally came apart. Great chunks of flesh flew up. Blood splashed. When the minigun stopped and the helicopter's shadow passed, what had been the cow lay in awful, steaming pieces.

Those powerful guns overhead were deeply reassuring to the men on the ground. On the streets of a hostile city with bullets snapping past, where the smell of blood and burnt flesh mingled with the odor of garbage and dung, the thrum of the Blackhawks reminded them they were not alone.

As the helicopter moved off, yet another crowd of Somalis began to

form. Nelson tried to direct his fire only at people with weapons, but those with guns were intermingled. He debated only momentarily before firing. The group dispersed, leaving bodies in the alleyway. Quickly another, larger group began to mass. People were closing in, just 50 feet up the road, some of them shooting.

Nelson wasn't weighing issues anymore. He cut loose with the M-60, and his rounds tore through the crowd like a scythe. A Little Bird swooped in and threw down a flaming wall of lead. Those who didn't fall fled. One moment there was a crowd, and the next instant it was just a bleeding heap of dead and injured.

"Goddamn, Nelson!" Waddell said. "Goddamn!"

Chapter 5

'My God, you guys. Look at this!'

November 19, 1997

Black Hawk Down

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JUST AFTER he had leveled the Somalian crowd with his M-60, leaving the street strewn with bodies, gunner Shawn Nelson heard the approach of a Blackhawk. It was Super 61, Cliff Wolcott's bird.

Chief Warrant Officer Wolcott was a funny guy whom everybody called Elvis because he affected the hair, walk and talk of his musical idol. There were guys in his unit who had known Elvis for years but would scratch their heads if you asked them about somebody named Cliff Wolcott. His exploits were legendary. He had flown secret missions behind enemy lines during the Persian Gulf war, refueling in flight, to knock out Saddam Hussein's Scud missile sites in Iraq.

On this mission, Wolcott's Super 61 had delivered a Chalk of Rangers and was now flying a low orbit over the target area in central Mogadishu. The bird's two crew chiefs were blasting targets with their mounted miniguns, and two Commando snipers in the rear were picking off Somalian gunmen. Every time the sleek black copters moved overhead, it gave the guys on the ground a good, protected feeling the boys called "a warm and fuzzy."

As Wolcott's Blackhawk passed overhead, Nelson's eye caught the distinctive flash and puff of an RPG - a rocket-propelled grenade. He saw the rocket climb into the helicopter's path. Then came a thunderclap. The bird's tail boom cracked, the rotor stopped spinning with an ugly grinding sound, and a chug-chug-chug coughing followed. The whole helicopter shuddered and started to spin - first slowly, then picking up speed.

"Oh, my God, you guys. Look at this!" Nelson said to the Rangers crouching with him. "Look at this!"

Wolcott's bird moved directly over them, spinning faster now.

Pvt. John Waddell, gasped, "Oh, Jesus." He fought the urge to just stand and watch the bird go down. He turned away to keep his eyes on his corner, watching for Somalian gunmen.

Nelson couldn't stop watching. The helicopter started to tilt as it hit the top of a house, then flipped over as it crashed into an alley, on its side.

"It just went down! It just crashed!"

The disbelief in Nelson's voice echoed the feelings of every soldier on the corner.

"What happened?" called First Lt. Tom DiTomasso, the Chalk Two leader, who came running.

"A bird just went down!" Nelson said. ``We've got to go. We've got to go right now!"

He knew the six men inside the Blackhawk needed help immediately - before Somalis got to them.

Word spread wildly over the radio, voices overlapped with the bad news. There was no pretense now of the deadpan calm of radio transmissions, the mandatory military monotone that said everything was under control. This was dreadful shock. Voices rose with surprise and fear:

We got a Blackhawk going down! We got a Blackhawk going down!

We got a Blackhawk crashed in the city! Sixty-one!

Sixty-one down!

It was more than a helicopter crash. It was a blow to the sense of invulnerability in all the young men on the ground. The Blackhawks and Little Birds were their trump cards. The helicopters, even more than the Rangers' rifles and machine guns, were what kept gunmen at a distance.

Nelson saw smoke and dust rising from the crash three blocks east. He saw crowds of Somalis running in that direction, and guns poking out of windows nearby. He spotted two boys running toward him, one with something in his hand. He dropped to one knee and felled them both with a burst from his M-60. One had been holding a stick. The other got up and limped for cover.

Nelson's buddy Waddell was feeling the same urge to run toward the crash. When another unit's Blackhawk had gone down two weeks earlier, the dead crew members were mutilated by the crowds. In the hangar the Rangers had talked about it. They were determined that such a thing would never happen to their guys.

But now they had to get permission on the radio from Capt. Mike Steele, the Ranger commander. Steele understood the urge to go help, but if Chalk Two left, the security perimeter around the target building would break down. He tried to get on the command network, but the calls were coming so thick and loud now he couldn't be heard.

"We need to go!" Nelson shouted at DiTomasso. "Now!"

Nelson started running at the same moment Steele called back. The captain had decided to authorize it himself.

DiTomasso ordered half of Chalk Two to stay at the target house. He took the other half - eight men - with him to the Blackhawk crash, running full trot to catch up with Nelson.

IT HAD TAKEN Chief Warrant Officer Keith Jones, piloting a Little Bird with the call sign Star 41, a few minutes to find the crash. Chief Warrant Officer Mike Goffena, piloting Blackhawk Super 62 above him, had helped guide him.

Two hundred meters. One hundred meters. You are coming over it right and low. Just passed it.

Jones banked hard left and then flew in. Landing in the big intersection closest to the downed Blackhawk would have been easier, but he didn't want to sit down where he would make a fat target from four different directions. So he'd eased his copter onto the street called Freedom Road and set it down on a slope between two stone houses.

Jones saw dark smoke choking the interior of the downed Blackhawk, and he knew just looking at it that his friends Elvis and Donovan "Bull" Briley, the copilot, were probably dead.

Somalis were coming at them. Both Jones and his copilot, Karl Maier, fired with handguns. Then Sgt. Jim Smith, a Commando sniper who had climbed out of the Blackhawk wreckage, appeared alongside Jones' window. It was Smith who had encountered Abdiaziz Ali Aden, the slender Somalian teenager who had hidden inside the old car nearby.

Now, over the din of the helicopter, Smith mouthed the words: "I need help." Smith had been shot in the meaty part of his left shoulder. The wounded sniper had dragged his injured Commando buddy, Staff Sgt. Daniel Busch, from the wreckage and positioned him against the wall with his weapon. While propped there, Busch had been shot again.

Jones hopped out and followed Smith to the downed Blackhawk, leaving Maier to control the Little Bird and provide cover up the alley.

Seconds after Jones left, Lt. DiTomasso rounded the corner and came upon the Little Bird. Maier nearly shot him. When Maier lowered his weapon, the startled lieutenant tapped his helmet, indicating he

wanted a head count on casualties. Maier didn't know.

Nelson and the other Rangers behind DiTomasso went after Jones and Smith. They saw that Busch, the gung-ho commando everybody called ``Rambusch," had a bad gut wound. His SAW (squad automatic weapon) was on his lap and a .45-caliber pistol was on the ground in front of him. Busch, a devoutly religious man, had told his mother before leaving for Somalia: "A good Christian soldier is just a click away from heaven."

Nelson found three Somalian bodies beside Busch. There was a woman and two men. One of the men was still breathing and trying to move, so Nelson pumped two finishing rounds into him. He then got down behind the bodies for cover while Jones and Smith pulled Busch uphill to the Little Bird. Nelson picked up Busch's pistol and stuck it in his pocket.

The rest of the squad fanned out to form a perimeter. Jones and Smith were having trouble dragging Busch, so Jones stooped and lifted him with both arms, and placed him in the small back door of the Little Bird. Then he helped the wounded Smith into the helicopter.

Jones examined Busch. He had been shot in the belly, just under his armor plate. His eyes were gray and rolled up in his head. He was still alive, barely, but Jones knew there was nothing he could do for him. He needed a doctor immediately. Jones climbed back into his pilot seat. On the radio he heard the command from the bird overhead.

Forty-one, come on out. Come out now.

With intensifying fire, there was a real risk that the Little Bird would be damaged and get stranded on the ground. Smith and Busch needed doctors. The pilots would have to leave the rest of the Super 61 crew and hope the Rangers could hold on until more help arrived.

Jones grabbed the stick and told Maier, "I have it."

Jones told the command network: "Forty-one is coming out."

Chapter 7

Another grenade, another chopper hit

November 22, 1997

PILOT MIKE GOFFENA was moving his Blackhawk up behind Mike Durant's bird when the grenade hit. The two helicopters were supposed to be opposite each other in orbit over the target area in Mogadishu, but Durant's Super 64 hadn't been in the formation long enough to get in sync. Durant was still struggling to take the spot vacated by Cliff Wolcott's Super 61, which lay smoldering on the ground after being shot down minutes earlier.

Goffena, flying Super 62, was closing in fast from behind when he saw the hit to Durant's gearbox. The grenade blew off a chunk of it. Goffena saw all the oil dump out of the rotor in a fine mist, but the bird stayed intact, and everything seemed to still be functioning.

"Sixty-four, are you OK?" Goffena radioed to Durant.

The Blackhawk is a big aircraft. Durant's chopper weighed 16,000 pounds with crew and gear, and the tail rotor was a long way from where he sat. Goffena's radio call came before Durant had even sorted out what had happened. He heard Goffena explain that he had been hit by an RPG fired by Somalis, and that there was damage to the tail area.

"Roger," Durant radioed back, coolly.

He didn't feel anything unusual about the Blackhawk at first. He did a quick check of his instruments and saw that all the readings were OK. His crew in back, Staff Sgt. Bill Cleveland and Sgt. Tommy Field, were unhurt. So after the initial shock, he felt relief. Everything was fine. Goffena told him he had lost his oil and part of the gearbox on the tail rotor, but the sturdy Blackhawk was built to run without oil for a time if necessary, and it was still holding steady.

Durant had faith in the aircraft, but it had absorbed a strong impact. The air mission commander, Lt. Col. Tom Matthews, who had seen the hit from the command-and-control helicopter circling above, told him to put the bird on the ground. Super 64 was out of the fight.

Durant pulled out of his left-turning orbit and pointed back to the Americans' airfield, about a four-minute flight southeast. He could see it off in the distance against the coastline. He noted, just to be safe, that there was a big green open area between him and the airfield, so if he had to land sooner, he had a place to put his helicopter. But the bird was flying fine.

Durant was the calm, collected type - a true pro. He had been with the secretive 160th SOAR (Special Operations Aviation Regiment), the Night Stalkers, long enough to be a veteran of dangerous, low-flying, night missions in the Persian Gulf war and the invasion of Panama.

He had learned to conduct himself with such discipline that many of his neighbors in Tennessee, near the Night Stalkers' base in Fort Campbell, Ky., didn't even know what he did for a living. His own family often didn't know where he was. In fact, he'd been given just two hours' notice of his assignment to Somalia. There had been just enough time to drive home and spend 15 minutes with his wife, Lorrie, and his baby son, Joey, and to explain that he would have to miss the child's first birthday three days later.

Sometimes it seemed that all he did was fly missions, or train for them. Practice defined the lives of the Night Stalker pilots. They practiced everything, even crashing. Their moves in the electronic maze of their cockpits were so well-rehearsed they had become instinctive.

Now Durant steered his crippled Blackhawk southeast over Mogadishu, toward the Indian Ocean and the base. His friend Goffena made a quick decision to follow him. Goffena's Super 62 had been providing cover for the target building and the crash site, where the Super 61 Blackhawk piloted by Cliff Wolcott had gone down from an RPG hit. Goffena had seen a rescue team rope in at Wolcott's downed bird, and the forces around the target building were getting ready to leave. Prioritizing quickly, he decided he would see his four friends in Durant's crippled bird at least part of the way safely home.

Goffena followed Super 64 for maybe a mile, to a point where he felt confident it would make it back. He was preparing to turn around when Durant's tail rotor, the whole assembly - the gearbox and two or three feet of the vertical fin assembly - just turned into a blur and evaporated.

Inside Super 64, Durant and his copilot, Ray Frank, felt the airframe begin to vibrate rapidly. They heard the accelerating, high-speed whine of the dry gear shaft in its death throes. Then came a very loud bang. With the top half of the tail fin gone, a big weight was suddenly dropped off the airframe's back end, and its center of gravity pitched forward.

As the nose lunged down, the big bird began to spin. After a decade of flying, Durant's reactions were instinctive. To make the airframe swing left meant pushing gently on the left pedal. He now noticed he had already jammed his left pedal all the way to the floor and his craft was still spinning rapidly to the right. The rotation of the big rotor blades wanted to make the airframe spin that way, and without a tail rotor there was no force to stop it.

The spin was faster than Durant ever imagined it could be. Details of earth and sky blurred, the way patterns do on a spinning top. Out the windshield he saw only blue sky and brown earth.

They were about 75 feet above ground when Goffena saw the Blackhawk spin 10 or 15 times in the seconds before it hit. It all happened too fast. Durant was trying to do something with the flight controls. Frank, in the seat next to him, somehow had the presence of mind to do exactly the right thing.

In crash simulators, pilots are taught to eliminate torque by shutting off the engines. But the controls for the engines were on the roof of the cockpit, so Frank had to fight the spin's strong centrifugal force to raise his arms. In those frantic seconds he managed to flip one engine switch to idle and turn the other halfway off.

Durant shouted into his radio: Going in hard! Going down!

He screamed his copilot's name: Raaaay!

Goffena was amazed to see the plummeting helicopter's spin rate suddenly slow. And just before impact, the nose of the bird came up. Whether for some aerodynamic reason or something Durant or Frank did inside the cockpit, the falling chopper leveled off.

With the spin rate down to half what it had been, and with the craft fairly level, the Blackhawk made a hard but flat landing.

Coming down flat was critical. It meant there was a chance the four

men inside Super 64 were alive.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 8

A second crash, and no escape

November 23, 1997

The crew of Super 64 a month before the battle. From left: Tommy Field, Bill Cleveland, Ray Frank and Mike Durant.

CIRCLING IN HIS HELICOPTER over Mike Durant's downed Blackhawk, pilot Mike Goffena saw that Durant had been lucky. His helicopter had crashed not into one of the many stone buildings in central Mogadishu, but into a warren of flimsy tin huts.

The chopper hadn't hit anything hard enough to flip it over. A Blackhawk is built with shock absorbers to withstand a terrifically hard impact, so long as it lands in an upright position. And Durant's Super 64 Blackhawk was indeed upright.

In other ways, Durant and his three crew members were less fortunate. The crash site was about a mile from the commandos and Rangers on the ground near the downtown target site. Durant had been shot down while taking the place of Cliff Wolcott's Blackhawk, which had crashed only a few blocks from the American troops.

The only airborne search-and-rescue team had already fast-roped down to Wolcott's bird, so there would be no easy way to reinforce Durant's crash site. If there had been an irremediable flaw in this mission, it was this lack of a second rescue force. Nobody had taken seriously the prospect of two helicopters going down. From above, Goffena could already see Somalis spilling into alleyways and footpaths, homing in on the newly downed bird.

Goffena flew a low pass and caught a glimpse of Durant in the cockpit, pushing at a section of tin roof that had caved in around his legs. Goffena was relieved to see that his friend was alive.

He flew close enough to catch the frustrated look on the face of

Durant's copilot, Ray Frank. Frank had been in a tail-rotor crash like this one on a training mission several years before. It had broken his leg and crunched his back, and he had been involved in a legal battle over it ever since. To Goffena, the look on Frank's face down there said, I can't believe this has happened to me again!

Then, in the back of the crumpled Blackhawk, Goffena saw movement. This told him that at least one of the crew chiefs, either Bill Cleveland or Tommy Field, was still alive.

At this point, 4:45 p.m., command conditions were on overload. Most of the Rangers and Commandos inserted at the target building were moving to the site of Wolcott's downed helicopter, where the air-rescue team had already roped in.

The situation report from the command helicopter sounded beleaguered.

We are getting a lot of RPG fire. There's a lot of fire. We are going to try to get everyone consolidated at the northern site [Wolcott's crash] and then move to the southern site [Durant's crash].

In the back of Blackhawk Super 62, Goffena had, in addition to his two crew chiefs, three commandos: snipers Randy Shughart, Gary Gordon and Brad Hallings. With Somalis closing in, he knew Durant's downed crew wouldn't last long. They were an air crew, not professional ground fighters like the boys.

Goffena's crew gunners and the snipers were now picking off armed Somalis. Goffena would drop down low, and the wash of his propellers would force the thickening crowds back. But the men with RPGs were slower to take cover, and his snipers were picking them off.

Goffena also noticed that every time he dropped down now, he was drawing more fire. He heard the ticking of bullets poking through the thin metal walls of the airframe. A couple of times he saw a glowing arc where a round would hit one of his rotor blades, which would spark and trace a bright line as the blade moved.

Goffena's Blackhawk and other helicopter gunships were holding the crowds back. Goffena and the other circling pilots worked the radio, pleading for immediate help. They were repeatedly assured that a rescue by the hurriedly assembled ground convoy was imminent.

But Goffena's air commander, realizing that it was taking too long to

get the new column up and moving, approved Goffena's request to put two of his helicopter's three commandos on the ground. The idea was for them to give first aid, set up a perimeter, and help Durant and his crew hold off the Somalis until the arrival of a rescue force.

This was not a hopeless mission. One or two properly armed, well-trained soldiers could hold off an undisciplined enemy indefinitely. Shughart and Gordon were experts at killing and staying alive. They were career soldiers trained to get hard, ugly things done. Gordon had enlisted at 17; his wife and children lived near Fort Bragg, N.C. Shughart was an outdoorsman from Western Pennsylvania who loved his Dodge truck and his hunting rifles.

When the crew chief gave Gordon the word that he and Shughart were going in, Gordon grinned and gave an excited thumbs-up. Goffena made a low pass at a small clearing, using his rotor wash to knock down a fence and blow away debris. He held a hover at about five feet, and the two boys jumped.

Shughart got tangled on the safety line connecting him to the chopper and had to be cut free. Gordon took a spill as he ran for cover. Shughart stood motioning with his hands, indicating their confusion. They were crouched in a defensive posture in the open.

Goffena dropped the copter down low and leaned out the window, pointing the way. A crew chief popped a small smoke marker out the side in the direction of Durant's helicopter. Shughart and Gordon ran to the smoke. The last thing the crew chiefs saw as the Blackhawk pulled away was both men signaling thumbs-up.

MIKE DURANT CAME TO and felt something was wrong with his right leg. He had been knocked cold for at least several minutes. He was seated upright in his seat, leaning slightly to the right. The windshield of his Blackhawk was shattered, and there was something draped over him, a big sheet of tin.

The helicopter seemed remarkably intact. The rotor blades had not flexed off. Durant's seat, which was mounted on shock absorbers, had collapsed down to the floor. It had broken in the full down position and was cocked to the right. He figured that was because they were spinning when they hit. The shocks had collapsed, and the spin had jerked the seat to the right.

It must have been the combination of the jerk and the impact that had broken his femur. The big bone in his right leg had snapped in two on the edge of his seat.

The Blackhawk had flattened a flimsy hut. No one had been inside, but in the next hut a 2-year-old girl, Howa Hassan, lay unconscious and bleeding. A hunk of flying metal had taken a deep gouge out of her forehead. Her mother, Bint Abraham Hassan, had been splashed with something hot, probably engine oil, and was severely burned on her face and legs.

The dazed pilots checked themselves over. Ray Frank's left tibia was broken. Durant did some things he later could not explain. He removed his helmet and his gloves. Then he took off his watch. Before flying he always took off his wedding ring because there was a danger it could catch on rivets or switches. He would pass the strap of his watch through the ring and keep it there during a flight. Now he removed the watch and took the ring off the strap, and set both on the dashboard.

He picked up his weapon, an MP-5K, a little German automatic rifle that fired 9mm rounds. The pilots called them ``SPs,'' or ``skinny-poppers,'' a reference to the nickname ``skinny'' the soldiers had bestowed on the wiry Somalian militiamen.

Frank was trying to explain what happened during the crash.

``I couldn't get them all the way off,'' he told Durant, explaining his struggle to turn off the engines as the helicopter plummeted. Frank said he had reinjured his back. Durant's back hurt, too. They both figured they had crushed vertebrae.

Durant could not pull himself out of the wreckage. He pushed the piece of tin roof away and decided to defend his position through the broken windshield.

Durant saw that Frank was about to push himself out. That was the last time he saw him. And just as Frank disappeared out the doorway, Shughart and Gordon, the commandos, showed up.

Durant was startled by their arrival. He didn't know either man well, but he recognized their faces. He knew they were the boys. He felt an enormous sense of relief. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but it had evidently been long enough for a rescue team to arrive.

His ordeal was over. He had been thinking about getting the radio operating, but now, with his rescuers at hand, there was no need.

Shughart and Gordon were calm. They reached in and lifted Durant out of the craft gently, one taking his legs and the other grabbing his torso, as if they had all the time in the world. They set him down by a tree.

He was not in great pain. Durant was in a perfect position to cover the whole right side of the aircraft with his skinny-popper. Behind him the front of his aircraft was wedged tightly against a tin wall, closing off any easy approach from that side.

He could see that his crew chiefs had taken the worst of the crash. They didn't have the shock absorbers in back. He watched them lift Bill Cleveland from the fuselage. He had blood all over his pants, and was talking but making no sense.

Then Gordon and Shughart moved to the other side of the helicopter to help Tommy Field, the other crew chief. Durant couldn't see what was happening. He assumed they were attending to Field and setting up a perimeter, or looking for a way to get them out, or perhaps looking for a place where another helicopter could set down and load them up.

Somalis were starting to poke their heads around the corner on Durant's side of the copter. He squeezed off a round, and they dropped back. His gun kept jamming, so he would eject the round, and the next time it would shoot properly. Then it would jam again.

He could hear more shooting from the other side of the airframe. It still hadn't occurred to him that Shughart and Gordon were the entire rescue force. There was no big rescue team - other than the emergency ground convoy, which was still forming at the airport base two miles away.

Durant also did not know, none of them did, that only 110 yards or so away, pilots Keith Jones and Karl Maier were waiting. The same team that had set the Little Bird down near the first crash site to help Cliff Wolcott's downed crew had now set their helicopter down again - to help Durant and his crew.

Jones and Maier were aiming their weapons at alleyways leading to the clearing, expecting a crowd of Somalis to show up any second, and hoping that Shughart and Gordon would arrive with Durant and his

crew. They were eager to load everybody up and hustle out of there.

Goffena, circling overhead, had seen Shughart and Gordon lift Durant and then Cleveland and Field out of the fuselage. He knew they weren't going to be able to carry them to where Jones' Little Bird was waiting.

He got on the radio and explained to Jones and Maier that the boys had set up a perimeter around Durant's Blackhawk. They had badly wounded crew members. They could not make it to the Little Bird. They were going to have to hang on until the ground force arrived.

After waiting on the ground about five minutes, Maier and Jones reluctantly asked for permission to leave and refuel. The Little Bird was running low, and they were vulnerable. They lifted off, leaving the Americans at crash site two to their fate.

DURANT'S BLACKHAWK had crashed in Wadigley, a crowded neighborhood just south of where Yousuf Dahir Mo'Alim lived on a street of rag huts and tin-roofed shanties. Mo'Alim was an armed bandit and gunman for hire, but on this day he had thrown his entire gang of 26 street fighters into the citywide effort to fight off the American invaders.

The instant Durant's helicopter hit the ground, Mo'Alim saw everyone around him reverse direction. Moments before, the crowd on the streets and the fighters had been moving north, over to where the first helicopter had crashed. Now everyone was running south. Mo'Alim ran with them, a goateed veteran soldier waving his weapon and shouting.

``Turn back! Stop! There are still men inside who can shoot!"

Some listened to Mo'Alim, for he was known as a militia leader. Others ran on ahead. Ali Hussein, who managed a pharmacy near where the helicopter crashed, saw many of his neighbors grab guns and run toward the wreck. He caught hold of the arm of his friend Cawale, who owned the Black Sea restaurant. Cawale had a rifle. Hussein grabbed him by both shoulders.

``It's dangerous. Don't go!" he shouted at him. But there was the smell of blood and vengeance in the air. Cawale wrestled away from Hussein and joined the running crowd.

Minutes later, as Mo'Alim and his men reached the second crash site,

they saw Cawale sprawled dead in the dirt, just four paces in front of the helicopter. The ground all around was littered with the bodies of Somalis. As Mo'Alim had expected, the Americans around the crashed helicopter were still very capable of fighting.

He tried to hold the crowd back, but they were angry and brazen. He wanted to find a way for his militiamen to get clear shots at the Americans, but it was difficult to approach the small clearing where the helicopter lay. The Americans had every approach covered with deadly automatic-weapons fire.

Mo'Alim waited for more of his men to catch up so that they could mount a coordinated attack.

DURANT STILL THOUGHT things were under control. His leg was broken but it didn't hurt. He was on his back, propped against a supply kit next to a small tree, using his weapon to keep back the occasional Somali who poked his head into the clearing.

He could hear firing on the other side of the helicopter. He knew Ray Frank, his copilot, was hurt but alive. And somewhere were the two boys and his crew chief, Tommy Field. He wondered if Tommy was OK. He figured it was only a matter of time before the ground vehicles showed up to take them out.

Then he heard one of the guys - it was Gary Gordon - shout that he was hit. Just a quick shout of anger and pain. He didn't hear the voice again.

The other guy, Randy Shughart, came back around to Durant's side of the bird.

"Are there weapons on board?" he asked.

The crew chiefs carried M-16s. Durant told him where they were kept, and Shughart stepped into the craft, rummaged around and returned with both rifles. He handed Durant Gordon's weapon, a CAR-15 automatic rifle loaded and ready to fire. He didn't say what had happened to Gordon.

"What's the support frequency on the survival radio?" Shughart asked.

It was then, for the first time, that it dawned on Durant that they were stranded. He felt a twist of alarm in his gut. If Shughart was asking how to set up communications, it meant he and Gordon had come in

on their own. They were the entire rescue team. And Gordon had just been shot!

Durant explained standard procedure on the survival radio to Shughart. He said there was a channel Bravo, and he listened while Shughart called out. Shughart asked for immediate help, and was told that a reaction force was en route. Then Shughart took the weapons and moved back around to the other side of the helicopter.

Durant felt panic closing in now. He had to keep the Somalis away. He could hear them talking behind a wall, so he fired in that direction. It startled him because he had been firing single shots, but this new weapon was set on burst. The voices behind the wall stopped. Then two Somalis tried to climb over the nose end of the copter. He fired at them, and they jumped back. He didn't know whether he had hit them.

A man tried to climb over the wall, and Durant shot him. Another came crawling from around the corner with a weapon, and Durant shot him, too.

Suddenly there was a mad fusillade on the other side of the helicopter that lasted for about two minutes. He heard Shughart shout in pain. The shooting stopped.

High overhead in the surveillance helicopters, worried commanders were watching on video screens.

Do you have video over crash site number two?

Indigenous personnel moving around all over the crash site.

Indigenous?

That's affirmative, over.

The radio fell silent.

Terror washed over Durant like nothing he had ever felt. He could hear sounds of an angry mob. The crash had left the clearing littered with debris, and he heard a great shuffling sound as the Somalis pushed it away. There was no more shooting. The others must be dead. Durant knew what had happened to soldiers who had fallen into the hands of angry Somalis. They did gruesome, horrible things. The rumor around the hangar was that they'd played soccer with the heads of a couple of downed pilots earlier that summer. That was in store for

him now. His second weapon was out of rounds. He still had a pistol strapped to his side, but he never even thought to reach for it.

It was over. He was done.

A Somali stepped around the nose of the helicopter. He seemed startled to find Durant lying there. The man shouted, and more Somalis came running. It was time to die. Durant placed the empty weapon across his chest, folded his hands over it, and turned his eyes to the sky.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 9

Alone, at the mercy of an angry mob

November 24, 1997

ON THE CROWDED STREETS people surged with anger around Mike Durant's crashed Blackhawk. They wanted to kill these Americans who had fallen from the sky and opened fire on their friends and neighbors. And despite furious gunfire from the soldiers around the downed helicopter, people continued to move in that direction.

In the months since the Rangers came, they had been swooping over the city at all hours of the night and day, blowing the tin roofs off houses and roping in to shoot and arrest Habr Gidr clan leaders. It was an insult to Somalia. On this day all the hatred had come to a boil, and many were already dead.

At the wreck site, Sgt. First Class Randy Shughart and Master Sgt. Gary Gordon were fending off the crowd, waiting for the promised rescue convoy of ground troops. Yousuf Dahir Mo'Alim, the neighborhood militia leader, had been trying to keep the angry crowd back. Now he didn't have to work as hard. The Somalian bodies strewn around the clearing and the deadly accurate fire from the Americans did that.

Mo'Alim stayed back himself. There was time. The Americans were surrounded. He waited until about a dozen of his men joined him, and then they fanned out to find good positions for a coordinated assault.

On the side of the helicopter he could see, there were two soldiers and a pilot who were firing. Another American lay dead or badly wounded. At Mo'Alim's signal, his men opened fire all at once on the Americans. After a furious exchange of fire that lasted at least two minutes, the Americans stopped firing. The crowd followed Mo'Alim and his men into the clearing.

The mob descended on the Americans. Only one was still alive. He shouted and waved his arms as the mob grabbed him by the legs and pulled him away, tearing at his clothes. People with knives hacked at the bodies of the dead Americans. Others in the crowd pulled and tore at the dead men's limbs. Soon people were running, shouting and cackling, parading with parts of the Americans' bodies.

When Mo'Alim ran around the tail of the helicopter, he was startled to find two other Americans. One, stretched on the ground, looked badly wounded or dead. The other, a pilot, was still alive. The man did not shoot. He set his weapon on his chest and folded his hands over it.

The crowd surged past Mo'Alim and fell on both men. Those who went for the pilot began kicking and beating him, but the bearded militia leader felt suddenly protective of the man. He grabbed the pilot's arm, fired his weapon in the air and shouted for the crowd to stay back.

One of his men struck the pilot hard in the face with his rifle butt, and Mo'Alim pushed him back. The pilot was at their mercy. It occurred to Mo'Alim that this American was more valuable alive than dead. The Rangers had spent months capturing Somalis and holding them prisoner. They would be willing to trade them, perhaps all of them, for one of their own.

Mo'Alim and some of his men formed a ring around the pilot to protect him from the mob, which sought only revenge. Several of Mo'Alim's fighters tore off Durant's clothing. The pilot had a pistol strapped to his side, and a knife, and the Somalis were afraid he had other hidden weapons. They knew the American pilots also wore beacons in their clothing so that the helicopters could track them, so they stripped him.

Durant kept his eyes on the sky. The Somalis were screaming things he couldn't understand. His nose was broken, and the bone around his eyes was shattered from the blow to his face.

When they started pulling off his clothes, they were unfamiliar with

the plastic snaps on his gear, so Durant reached down and squeezed them open. His boots were yanked off, then his survival vest and his shirt. A man started unzipping his pants, but when he saw that the pilot wore no underwear (for comfort in the equatorial heat) he zipped the trousers back up. They also left on his brown T-shirt. All the while he was being kicked and hit.

A young man leaned down and grabbed at the green ID card Durant wore around his neck. He stuck it in Durant's face and shouted in English, ``Ranger, Ranger, you die Somalia!"

Then someone threw a handful of dirt in his face, and it filled his mouth. They tied a rag or a towel over the top of his head and eyes, and the mob hoisted him up, partly carrying and partly dragging him. He felt the broken end of his femur pierce the skin in the back of his right leg and poke through.

He was buffeted from all sides, kicked, hit with fists, rifle butts. He could not see where they were taking him. He was engulfed in a great chorus of hate and anger. Someone, he thought a woman, grabbed his penis and testicles and yanked at them.

And in this agony of fright, Durant suddenly left his body. He was no longer at the center of the crowd. He was in it, or above it, perhaps. He was observing the crowd attacking him, apart somehow. He felt no pain. The fear lessened, and he passed out.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 10

At the base, bravery and hesitation

November 25, 1997

FOR THE RANGERS left behind at the American airport base on the beach in Mogadishu, the battle seemed immediate and distant at the same time. Unlike the commanders at the Joint Operations Center nearby, they couldn't watch the fight unfold on video screens.

All they had was the radio, and that was enough. They could tell the mission had gone to hell. The snatch-and-grab mission had clearly

become a pitched battle. They heard the voices of men who never got rattled shouting with fear and cracking with emotion. Their best friends, their brothers, were trapped and dying.

They heard the radio describe Cliff Wolcott's Blackhawk going down, and then Mike Durant's. The fight really hit home when Sgt. Dominick Pilla's humvee rolled in, all shot up and mangled. Pilla had been shot in the head and killed. His vehicle had been part of a convoy carrying Pfc. Todd Blackburn, who fell from a helicopter at the start of the mission. Blackburn looked awful. His eyes were closed, his mouth was bloody, and he wasn't moving.

No one was more fired up than Spec. Dale Sizemore, a husky blond kid from Illinois. The Rangers called him "Adonis." He had the word Ranger tattooed twice on his bulging left deltoid.

Earlier that day, Sizemore had felt miserable when his buddies had suited up for the mission. He couldn't go because he had a cast on his arm. He had banged up his elbow a few days earlier wrestling with a Commando colonel who had flung him down.

Now word came that the remnants of Pilla's convoy were to be joined by fresh Rangers and vehicles from the base. They were going to fight their way to the Durant site and rescue the crew.

Not everyone was as eager as Sizemore. Spec. Steve Anderson, hearing the distant gunfire and the radio traffic, had a sick feeling. Anderson and Sizemore were both Rangers from Illinois, and were friends, but they were quite different. Anderson was slender and quiet, with a bad case of asthma. He had shrapnel in his legs from a night mission a few weeks earlier. Until then he had been as gung ho as the rest of the guys, but his wounds, while minor, had cracked his Hoo-ah spirit.

Anderson was dismayed by the confusion of shouting and shooting. It seemed to him that everybody was using the radio twice as much as usual, as if they needed to stay in touch, as if talk were a net to prevent their free fall. As much as it made Sizemore want to join the fight, it made Anderson want to be someplace else. He dared not show it. His stomach was churning, and he was in a cold sweat. Do I have to go out there?

Seeing Pilla dead and Blackburn busted up brought things into immediate and dire focus. What are we doing in this place? Then

Anderson got a good look at Spec. Brad Thomas. Pilla had dropped dead in Thomas' lap inside the humvee. Thomas rode the whole way back bathed in his dead friend's blood.

As Thomas emerged from the humvee now, his eyes were red. He looked at Anderson and choked out, "Pilla's dead." Thomas was crying, and Anderson felt himself start to cry and he realized, I do not want to go out there. He was ashamed, but that's how he felt.

He looked at the Commados and SEALs who had climbed off the little convoy. These guys were like machines. They were already rearmed and ready to charge back out. There was no hesitation whatsoever. But the Rangers were all shaken, to a man.

Thomas lost it. "I can't go back out there!" he shouted. "I can't! They're shooting from everywhere!"

Even those Rangers who remained composed felt the same way. How could they go back out into that? They'd barely escaped with their lives. The whole damn city was trying to kill them!

The commander of Pilla's tiny convoy, Staff Sgt. Jeff Struecker, felt his own heart sink. His vehicles were all shot up. His men were freaking out. One of the Commadno guys pulled him aside.

"Look, sergeant, you need to clean your vehicle up," he said, pointing to the blood-splattered humvee. "If you don't, your guys are going to get more messed up. It's going to mess them up. They're going to get sick."

Struecker strode over to his Rangers.

"Listen, men. You don't have to do this if you don't want to. I'll do it myself if I have to. But we have to clean this thing up right now because we're fixing to roll right back out. Everybody else go resupply. Go get yourselves some more ammunition."

Struecker asked his 50-gunner, "Will you help me clean up? You don't have to."

The gunner nodded glumly. Together they set off for buckets of water. Sizemore saw all this, and it made him wild with anger.

"I'm going out there with you guys," he said.

"You can't, you're hurt," said his team leader, Sgt. Raleigh Cash.

Sizemore didn't argue. He was wearing gym shorts and a T-shirt. The rest of his gear had been packed away for his medevac flight home the next day. He ran into the hangar, pulled on pants and a shirt, and began grabbing stray gear.

He found a flak vest that was three sizes too big for him and a helmet that lolled around on his head like a salad bowl. He grabbed his SAW, his squad automatic weapon, and stuffed ammo into his pockets and pouches. He raced back out to the convoy with his boots unlaced and his shirt unbuttoned.

"I'm going out," he told Cash.

"You can't go out there with that cast on your elbow," Cash said.

"Then I'll lose it."

Sizemore ran back into the hangar, found a pair of scissors, and cut straight up the inside seam and flung the cast away. Then he came back and climbed onto a humvee.

Cash just looked at him and shook his head. "OK," he said.

Anderson saw Sizemore's response and admired him enormously for it, and felt all the more ashamed. He had donned his own vest and helmet, and taken a seat in the back of a humvee, but he was mortified. He didn't know whether to feel more ashamed of his fear or of his sheeplike acceptance of the orders.

He had decided he would go out into Mogadishu and risk his life, but it wasn't out of passion or solidarity or patriotism. It was because he didn't dare refuse. He showed none of this.

As the other men were about to board the humvees, Thomas pulled Struecker aside.

"Sgt. Struecker, I can't go back out there," Thomas said.

The sergeant knew this was coming. All the men watched for his response. Struecker was a model Ranger: strong, unassuming, obedient, tough and, above all, by the book. There was no doubt that, of all of them, Struecker fit the unit's mold better than anyone else. He was like the prize pupil in class. The officers loved him, which meant that at least some of his men regarded him with a slightly jaundiced

eye. With Struecker challenged like this, they expected him to explode.

Instead, he pulled Thomas aside and spoke to him quietly, man to man. He tried to calm him, but Thomas was calm. He'd made a calculated decision, a perfectly rational one. He'd taken all he could take. He'd just been married a few months before. He was not going to go out there and die.

He repeated very deliberately, "I can't do it."

However steep a price a man would pay for backing down like that - and for a Ranger it would be a steep price indeed - Thomas had made a decision.

"Listen," Struecker said. "I understand how you feel. I'm married, too. Don't think of yourself as a coward. I know you're scared. I'm scared. . . . I've never been in a situation like this, either. But we've got to go. It's our job. The difference between being a coward and a man is not whether you're scared, it's what you do while you're scared."

Thomas didn't seem to like the answer. He walked away. As they were about to pull out, Struecker noticed to his relief that Thomas had climbed on board with the rest of the men.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 11

Besieged, disoriented as bullets fly

November 26, 1997

Clay Othic in the turret out by the range.

PRIVATE CLAY OTHIC shot a chicken. In the melee that began as soon as the nine-vehicle ground convoy turned the corner at the Olympic Hotel, Othic had seen people running, men with AK-47s firing wildly, and chickens flying. He had opened up from the turret of his humvee with the powerful .50-cal, and one of the rounds turned a chicken into a puff of feathers.

Everything was getting blown apart in this battle - brick walls, houses,

cars, cows, men, women, children. Othic felt besieged and disoriented. Anything seemed possible. He had already torn a man apart with the .50-cal, and he'd mowed down a crowd of men and women who had opened fire on the convoy.

Othic's humvee was the last vehicle in the column. With all the gunfire and chaos around them, it was impossible for the Rangers in the vehicles to tell what was going on. But they all understood that this quick mission into Mogadishu was developing into the gunfight of their lives.

The convoy's original mission had been to load up 24 Somalian prisoners seized in the raid and haul them back to the airport base, along with commandos and Ranger teams around the target house. The plan changed dramatically when Cliff Wolcott's Blackhawk went down four blocks east of the target house.

Most of the men fighting in the vehicles didn't know it, but they had just been given new orders. Gary Harrell, a Commando colonel in the command helicopter, instructed the convoy to load up the prisoners, as planned. But instead of returning to base, they were to wend their way through Mogadishu's narrow streets and rescue Wolcott and his crew. All this while guarding two dozen prisoners and taking fire that was getting more intense by the minute.

Lost and wandering in Mogadishu's confusing alleyways, they badly needed guidance. They were directed by officers watching from above on video screens, Col. Harrell in the command bird at 3,000 feet, and U.S. Navy pilots in a P-3 Orion spy plane about 1,000 feet higher than the helicopters.

Before they could carry out their revised orders, Mike Durant's Blackhawk was shot down about a mile south of the convoy. The orders changed again. Now they were told to continue as planned to the Wolcott crash site. But after that they were to load up the soldiers who had rushed to Wolcott's aid, and then fight their way to the Durant site a mile away.

But the convoy itself needed help. To an extent the commanders didn't realize from watching on their screens above, the men in the vehicles were getting hammered.

Othic had been one of the first men hit. It happened just after he had

seen an RPG launched from a crowd of Somalis. He watched the grenade explode on one of the five-tons, disabling it and mangling the legs of Staff Sgt. Dave Wilson, who had been standing alongside.

Othic had just turned to fire on the crowd when he heard a loud crack. It felt as if a baseball bat had whacked his right arm. A round had splintered the forearm. In a few blinding moments of pain he just went "cyclic" on the big gun, firing it on automatic, sweeping the street behind the convoy until Sgt. Lorenzo Ruiz stepped up to take the gun.

Othic wasn't the only casualty. Sgt. First Class Bob Gallagher had been shot in the arm. Sgt. Bill Powell had been shot in the meaty part of his calf. In the back of one truck, Wilson held his weapon on the prisoners and propped up his mangled legs.

There weren't enough vehicles to carry all four Chalk teams and the Commando guys from the target house. Three vehicles had been dispatched earlier to return an injured Ranger to the main base. Some of the soldiers were able now to jump on the remaining vehicles, but the others had to move out on foot.

The trucks had big, fluorescent-orange panels on top to help the surveillance birds keep an eye on them. The helicopters were the troops' eyes in the sky, guiding them through the maze. If everything went well - the 20-man convoy and ground units linking up at the Wolcott crash site with all the Rangers and Commando teams already there - there would be nearly 120 men to rescue the two downed crews and then fight their way out of the hornet's nest.

Othic stretched out on his belly in back of the second-to-last humvee, which had its slope-backed hatch open so he and the others crammed in there could shoot out the back. He had a field dressing on his right arm, and he was using his left arm to shoot his M-16. He was a crack shot. An avid hunter from Holt, Mo., Othic had grown up with guns. The Rangers had nicknamed him "Little Hunter," for he was the smallest man in the unit.

Next to Othic, Sgt. Ruiz was working the .50-cal steadily. The big gun's recoil gently rocked the wide vehicle, which was comforting.

They started off following the soldiers who were on foot, but the helicopters steered them along a different route. A few turns later they found themselves right back where they had been minutes earlier. And

that spot was just a few blocks north of the target house, where they had loaded up their prisoners as the mission began an hour earlier.

There they came upon Staff Sgt. Matt Eversmann, whose Chalk Four had been pinned down since the mission began. When a Ranger captain had ordered Eversmann to move his Chalk to Wolcott's crash site on foot, the sergeant had said, ``Roger,'' but to himself had said facetiously, Right. His men were badly shot up. He had only about four or five still able to fight out of the original Chalk of about a dozen soldiers.

Eversmann was relieved to see the convoy approach. He spotted his buddy Sgt. Mike Pringle, a tiny guy, so low in the turret of the lead humvee that he was actually peering out from underneath the .50-cal. It brought a smile to Eversmann's face despite his ordeal.

Eversmann loaded his bloodied men on the crowded vehicles, piling them on top of other guys. As he stood there taking a final mental count of his men, the column started moving. Eversmann had to make a running leap on the back of a humvee. He landed on top of somebody, and found himself flat on his back, looking up at the sky, realizing what a terrific target he was and that he couldn't even return fire. As helpless as he felt, he was relieved to be back with the others, and moving. If they were together and rolling, it meant the end was near. Wolcott's crash site was just blocks away.

Up ahead, in the second truck, Othic's buddy, Spec. Eric Spalding, was firing away steadily with his M-16. He was amazed at the ferocity of the Somalian attacks. There were people with guns in alleyways, at windows, on rooftops. Each time his M-16 magazine was used up, Spalding shot with his 9mm Berretta pistol while he replaced the rifle magazine with his free hand.

As they crossed one alley, a woman in a flowing purple robe darted past on the driver's side of the truck. The driver had his pistol resting on his left arm, and he was shooting at whatever moved.

"Don't shoot," Spalding shouted at him. "She's got a kid!"

At that moment the woman turned. Holding a baby on one arm, she raised a pistol with her free hand. Spalding shot her where she stood. He shot four more rounds into her before she fell. He hoped he hadn't hit the baby. They were moving fast, and he didn't get to see whether he had. He thought he probably had hit the baby. She had been

carrying the infant on her arm, right in front. Why would a mother do something like that with a kid on her arm? What was she thinking?

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 12

Left, right, left - lost and bloody

November 27, 1997

IN ORDINARY circumstances, as close to Cliff Wolcott's crash site as they were, the convoy would have just barreled over to it, running over and shooting through anything in its path. But with the surveillance helicopters and P-3 Orion spy plane overhead, the convoy was about to illustrate how too much information can hurt soldiers on a battlefield.

From above, commanders could see Somalis throwing up roadblocks and preparing ambushes in Mogadishu. A group of about 15 gunmen was running along streets parallel to the convoy, keeping up because the two five-ton trucks and six humvees were stopping and then darting across intersections one at a time. This gave the gunmen time to get to the next street and set up to fire at each vehicle as it came through.

The men in the vehicles had been ordered to fight their way to Wolcott's crash site, help rescue the crew, then get over to pilot Mike Durant's crash site about a mile south. But the convoy couldn't get anywhere because it was lost - and getting riddled.

The choppers and the spy plane, flown by U.S. Navy aviators, tried to steer the convoy clear of Somalian gunfire, dodging the soldiers left and right on the labyrinthine streets. It was like negotiating a maze. But the Orion pilots were handicapped. They were not allowed to communicate directly with the convoy. Their orders were to relay all communications to the Joint Operations Center (JOC) back at the beach. So when the Orion pilots said, ``Turn left,'' that message went first to the JOC and then to the convoy. The pilots watched with frustration as the convoy drove past the place they had directed it to turn, then, getting the delayed message, turned left down the wrong street.

There was another problem. Watching on screens, the commanders weren't hearing the pop of bullets and feeling the bone-rattling, lung-sucking blast of grenades. The convoy's progress seemed orderly. The video images were't conveying how desperate the situation was.

Lying helplessly on his back, Staff Sgt. Matt Eversmann felt his vehicle steer left when he knew the crash site was back to his right. There was another turn. Then another. It was easy to get lost in Mogadishu. Roads you thought were taking you one place would suddenly slant off in a different direction.

At the rear of the convoy, SEAL John Gay, his right hip still aching and bloody from where an AK-47 round had been stopped by his knife, was also getting frustrated. There were about seven wounded Rangers in his humvee who seemed to be in varying degrees of paralysis. As far as Gay could see, none had life-threatening or immobilizing injuries. All were capable of fighting, but few of them were. They seemed to believe that their mission had ended with the capture of the Somalis back at the target house. It was already evident to Gay that they were not on their way home but were fighting for their lives.

Sgt. First Class Matt Rierson, leader of the Commando team that had taken the Somalis, did not know where the convoy was going. He was riding blind. Standard procedure on a convoy was to tell each driver where he was headed. That way, if the lead vehicle got hit, the convoy could continue.

But convoy commander Danny McKnight, a lieutenant colonel more accustomed to commanding a battalion than a line of vehicles, hadn't told anyone. McKnight was in his lead vehicle with a radio plugged in his ear, relying on his eyes in the sky to direct him. The inexperienced Ranger drivers kept stopping at intersections, or stopping just beyond them, leaving the vehicle immediately behind exposed to a wicked crossfire.

The convoy took several doglegs onto side streets and got no closer to Wolcott's crash site. Every time they stopped, the able-bodied would jump out to pull security, or guard the column, and then more people would get shot. Those who were not wounded were smeared with the blood of those they had helped carry back to vehicles.

It was a nightmare. The sun was low now, so turning west meant a blinding stab of dusk. At one point, after driving through a hail of

gunfire, the column stopped, then made a U-turn and drove straight back through the same maelstrom.

Every time the ungainly five-tons turned around, they would have to pull clumsily up and back, up and back, to negotiate the narrow streets. The whole exercise seemed maddeningly foolhardy. Veterans such as Gay and Rierson wondered, Who's calling the shots here?

The driver of Gay's humvee, Howard Wasdin, who had been shot in the left leg back by the target house, was hit in the right leg. Pfc. Clay Othic's shattered right arm ached but wasn't bleeding. He was shooting through his second magazine of M-16 ammo when Sgt. Lorenzo Ruiz, a tough little ex-boxer from El Paso, Texas, who had taken over the .50-cal, suddenly slumped down.

``He got shot! He got shot!'' shouted the driver, who raced the humvee frantically up the column with the .50-cal just spinning around in the empty turret.

``Get the .50-cal up!'' screamed Sgt. First Class Bob Gallagher. ``Get the .50 cal up ASAP!''

Packed in the way they were, with Ruiz now slumped on top of them, no one could climb into the turret from inside the humvee. Spec. Dave Ritchie got out and jumped up to the turret from the street. He couldn't climb inside because Ruiz's limp form was in the way, so he hung on from the outside as they began moving again. Ritchie swiveled and shot the big gun.

Inside, the men pulled Ruiz out of the turret. They tore off his flak vest and shirt, and found a hole in his lower right chest and a bigger exit wound in his back. He was bleeding heavily and seemed to be in shock. Ruiz, like many of the men in the vehicles, had taken the armored plates out of his flak vest to reduce the weight he had to carry in the African heat.

They made another stop. Rangers piled out to provide cover.

At opposite sides of one alley stood Spec. Aaron Hand and Sgt. Casey Joyce, the Ranger who had earlier run alone through gunfire to get help for Pvt. First Class Todd Blackburn, the Ranger who had fallen 70 feet off the fast rope at the start of the mission. That seemed like hours ago.

Joyce and Hand were in a furious firefight. Spec. Eric Spalding, who

had just leaped from his truck to provide cover, watched rounds shatter the wall just over Hand's head. They had to get out of there.

``We're going to move!" he screamed to Hand.

Hand didn't hear him. From where Spalding stood, it looked as if Hand was going to be shot for sure. He was doing everything wrong. He had not sought cover; he was changing magazines with his back exposed. Spalding knew that he should go help cover his friend and pull him back, but that meant crossing the alley where bullets were flying. He hesitated. Hell no, I'm not going to cross that alley.

As Spalding debated with himself, Gay ran out to help. The SEAL fired several rounds up the alley and herded Hand back to the vehicles.

Across the alley, Joyce was on one knee, doing things right. He'd found cover and was returning disciplined fire, just the way he'd been trained. Then a gun barrel poked out a window above Joyce and let off a quick burst. There wasn't even time for Spalding to shout a warning, even if Joyce had been able to hear him. There was just a blaaaap! and a spurt of fire from the barrel, and the sergeant went straight down in the dirt on his face.

Immediately, a .50-cal on one of the humvees blasted gaping holes in the wall around the window where the gun had appeared. Sgt. Jim Telscher, weaving through the heavy fire, sprinted out to Joyce, grabbed him by the shirt and vest, and dragged him back to the vehicles.

Joyce's skin was white. His eyes were open wide but empty. He looked dead. He had been hit through the vest in the upper back where the Rangers' new flak vests had no protective plate. The round had passed through his torso and had come out his abdomen. It lodged in the front of the vest, which did have an armored plate. They loaded Joyce in back with the mounting number of wounded.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 13

No cover from the flying grenades

November 28, 1997

FED UP, MATT RIERSON left his humvee back in the column and sprinted up to the lead vehicle. As he saw it, Danny McKnight was overwhelmed. The colonel leading the convoy appeared completely lost. And now McKnight, too, was wounded. He was bleeding from the arm and the neck.

Sgt. Rierson finally learned from McKnight where they were trying to go. Then, on his way back down the column, the commando stopped at every vehicle and spread the word. He screamed at each driver to stay out of the intersections, where they were exposed to concentrated fire.

Some of the men in the column had caught glimpses of Cliff Wolcott's helicopter crash site in their meandering, but had no idea that was where they were supposed to go. Rierson tried to impose some order on the column. He began trying to call in helicopter gunships, while other members of his Delta team organized men to collect the wounded every time the column stopped.

Over the radio came a hopeful inquiry from Command, which clearly misunderstood their situation.

Uniform 64, you got everybody out of the crash site? Over.

Uniform 64 was the column's code name. McKnight answered:

We have no positive contact with them yet. We took a lot of rounds as we were clearing out of the area. Quite a few wounded, including me. Over.

Command replied:

Roger. Want you to try to go to the first crash site and consolidate on that. Once we get everybody out of there we'll go to the second crash site and try to do an exfill [move out].

This was, of course, out of the question, but McKnight wasn't giving up.

Roger. Understand. Can you give me some . . . we just need a direction and distance from where I'm at.

There was no answer at first. The radio net was filled with calls related to the crash of Mike Durant's helicopter. When McKnight did

hear from Command again, he was asked to report the number of Rangers he had picked up from Staff Sgt. Matt Eversmann's Chalk Four. He ignored the request. He wanted to know where the hell he was.

Romeo 64, this is Uniform 64. From the crash site, where am I now? How far over?

Stand by. Have good visual on you now . . . Danny, are you still on that main hardball [paved road]?

I'm on the exfill road. Down toward National.

Turn east. Go about three blocks east and two blocks north. They're popping smoke.

Understand. From my location I have to go east farther about three blocks and then head north.

So the increasingly deadly search resumed. As they turned another corner, they encountered a roadblock. Piling out of the vehicles to provide security, the Americans were hit with a terrific volley of fire from the Somalis.

Staff Sgt. John Burns took two bullets, and Pfc. Adalberto Rodriguez was hit by a volley. His body armor stopped a round that hit his chest, but three other bullets struck the inner thighs of both legs. He dragged himself out of the vehicle, and medics began patching him up. They helped him back into the humvee.

Spec. Eric Spalding jumped out of his truck to help carry Burns to a vehicle and, as he carried him, he felt the sergeant get hit by another round. Spalding was about to climb back into his seat on his truck when he was grabbed by an enraged Rierson and yanked back out to the street. The sergeant was shouting so hard his face was beet red, and Spalding could see veins bulging in his neck, but the noise of gunfire was so loud he couldn't hear.

"What?"

The sergeant put his florid face right up to Spalding's nose and enunciated every word.

"PULL YOUR F-ING TRUCK FORWARD!"

Their sudden stop had left the vehicles behind backed up, and Rierson's humvee was stuck in the middle of an intersection again, exposed to enemy fire.

To make room on the back of his humvee for the wounded Burns, Pfc. Clay Othic had jumped out and run down to another truck. Sgt. First Class Bob Gallagher held down a hand to help him climb aboard in back, but with his broken arm Othic couldn't grab hold of anything. After several failed attempts he ran around to the cab, where Spec. Aaron Hand stepped out to let Othic squeeze between himself and the driver, Pfc. Richard Kowalewski, a skinny, quiet kid from Texas whom they all called "Alphabet" because they didn't want to pronounce his name.

Two humvees farther back, Pvt. Ed Kallman sat behind the wheel, increasingly amazed and alarmed by what was happening around him. Ahead, he saw a line of trees on the sidewalk begin to explode, one after the other, as if someone had put charges in each and was detonating them one at a time. Somebody with a big gun was systematically taking out the trees, thinking Somalian gunmen were hiding in them.

As the convoy moved out again, it suddenly seemed to be raining RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades). Pfc. Tory Carlson was wedged in between the two rear seats of the second humvee in the column. Stuffed in behind him, shooting out the open hatch in the rear, were Sgt. Jim Telscher, the wounded Rodriguez, and Commando Master Sgt. Tim "Grizz" Martin, who was leaning against a row of sandbags to one side.

Carlson heard a grenade explode behind his humvee, and moments later came a blinding flash and an ear-shattering Boom! The inside of his vehicle was clogged with black smoke. The goggles he had pinned to the top of his helmet were blown off. A grenade had gone through the steel skin of the vehicle, right in front of the gas cap, and exploded inside. The blast blew Rodriguez, Telscher and Martin out of the back end of the moving vehicle.

It ripped the hand guards off Sgt. Jeff McLaughlin's M-16 and pierced his left forearm with a chunk of shrapnel. He felt no pain, just some numbness in his hand. He told himself to wait until the smoke cleared to check it out. The shrapnel had fractured a bone in his forearm, severed a tendon, and broken a bone in his hand. But it wasn't bleeding much, and he could still shoot.

Carlson felt himself for wet spots. His left arm was bloody where shrapnel had pierced it in several places. His boots were on fire. A drum of .50-cal ammo had been hit, and he heard people screaming for him to kick it out! Kick it out! He booted the drum, then stooped to pat out the flames on his feet.

The explosion blew off the back side of Rodriguez's left thigh and practically tore Martin in half. The grenade had poked a football-sized hole right through the skin of the humvee, blown on through the sandbags inside, passed through Martin's lower body, and penetrated the ammo drum.

Telscher, Rodriguez and Martin now lay writhing on the road behind the smoking humvee. Rodriguez had tumbled about 10 yards before coming to rest. His legs were a mass of blood and gore. He began struggling to his feet, only to see one of the five-ton trucks bearing straight for him. Its driver, Pvt. 2 John Maddox, stunned and momentarily disoriented by another grenade blast, rolled the truck right over Rodriguez.

Soldiers scrambled again from the vehicles to pick up their wounded comrades. Medics did what they could for Rodriguez and Martin, both of whom were gravely wounded. Rierson helped carry some of the injured and found places for them in the back end of humvees. In the rear of one he found an uninjured Ranger sergeant hiding, curled in fetal position. There wasn't enough time to say or do anything about it.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 14

Hammered, and still no sign of help

November 29, 1997

PVT. ED KALLMAN, who had felt such a surge of excitement an hour earlier when encountering battle for the first time, now felt a cold sweat of panic behind the wheel of his humvee toward the rear of the lost convoy. So far, neither he nor anyone in his vehicle had been hit. But he watched with horror as the convoy disintegrated before him. He was a soldier for the most powerful nation on earth.

If they were having this much trouble, shouldn't somebody have

stepped in? Where was a stronger show of force? It didn't seem right that they could be reduced to this, battling on these narrow dirt streets, bleeding, dying! This isn't supposed to be happening!

Men he knew and admired were dead or bellowing in pain on the street with gunshot wounds that exposed great crimson flaps of glistening muscle. They were wandering in the smoke, bleeding, dazed, their clothing torn off. Those who were not injured were smeared with the blood of others.

Kallman was young and new to the unit. These were men he looked up to and felt good about going into battle with, men who knew how to fight and would keep him safe. If these experienced soldiers were getting hit, sooner or later he was going to take a hit, too. And all this dangerous driving wasn't even taking them back to the base. They were supposed to be rescuing the two Blackhawk pilots who had been shot down, Cliff Wolcott and Mike Durant, along with their crews. Now they were going to be out in this horror all night!

As Kallman slowed down to let the humvee in front of him clear an intersection, he looked out the open window to his left and saw a smoke trail coming straight at him. It all happened in a second. He knew it was a rocket-propelled grenade and he knew it was going to hit him. It did. Kallman awoke lying on his right side on the front seat with his ears ringing. He opened his eyes and was looking directly at the radio mounted under the dash. He sat up and floored the accelerator, and the vehicle took off, fast. Up ahead he saw the convoy making a left turn, and he raced to catch up.

The grenade had hit Kallman's door. He and the others inside had been saved by a combination of the metal door and the bulletproof glass inside it. Because the window was rolled down, the point of the grenade hit first steel and then the reinforced glass.

BY NOW THE EFFORTS to direct the convoy had turned to black comedy. It was complicated by the fact that a second convoy had been dispatched from the airport base to attempt a rescue at Mike Durant's downed Super 64, and those vehicles were under fire, too.

Lt. Col. Danny McKnight, the convoy commander, struggled to make sense of the directions rattling over the radio. Here, the instruction from Command refers to the second crash site, while McKnight's convoy was actually searching for the first:

Danny, I think you've gone too far west trying to look at the second crash. You seem to have gone about four blocks west and five blocks south. Over.

Then:

Uniform 64, this is Romeo 64. Give me a right turn. Convoy, right turn! Right turn!

And then:

You need to go about four blocks south, turn east. There is green smoke marking the site south. Keep coming south.

At one point a voice came over the busy command frequency begging for order.

Stop giving directions! . . . I think you're talking to the wrong convoy!

But still the instructions came, and in overlapping confusion:

Uniform 64, this is Romeo 64. Next right. Next right! Alleyway! Alleyway!

They just missed their turn.

Take the next available right, Uniform.

Be advised they are coming under heavy fire.

Goddamn it, stop! Goddamn it, stop!

Right turn! Right turn! You're taking fire! Hurry up!

It was the experienced commandos on the convoy who held things together. Every time another man was hurt, the boys would brave fire on the streets to recover him, and Commando medic Don Hutchingson would go to work.

Sgt. First Class Matt Rierson kept radio lines up with the Little Birds, relaying the convoy's status and calling in air support. Things had deteriorated so badly that officers in the command helicopter were considering just releasing what they called ``all the precious cargo'' - the 24 Somalian prisoners.

Ahmen Warsame was among the handcuffed prisoners in a five-ton truck. They were stacked tightly into the space, laid out on their sides. Under the din of gunfire he heard the sound of muttered prayers, until the Somalian man praying was shot dead. There was no telling who had fired the shot. Told to be silent, the frightened prisoners began talking among themselves until a Ranger clubbed one of the Somalis in the head.

Finally, after about 45 minutes of meandering, they were right back where they started, out on Hawlwadig Road.

This is Uniform 64. You've got me back in front of the Olympic Hotel.

McKnight was ready to pack it in. There were far more dead and wounded in the convoy than there were at the two crash sites.

When the shooting let up for a few moments, the convoy stopped. McKnight and some of the ranking noncoms huddled in the street to assess their situation - how they had gotten lost, and where they should go now. They set off a purple smoke grenade to mark their position.

McKnight got on the radio.

We've got a lot of vehicles that will be almost impossible to move. Quite a few casualties. Getting to the crash site will be awful tough. Are pinned down.

Command was insistent:

Danny, I really need to get you back to that crash site. I know you turned left on Armed Forces [Blvd.], what's your status?

But McKnight and his men had had enough. They had made a courageous effort, but casualties were piling up. They were going to give up on reaching either crash site. The colonel answered:

I have numerous casualties, vehicles that are halfway running. Got to get these casualties out of here ASAP.

They started back to base, but they weren't home yet

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 15

Ambush after ambush:

Fighting just to stay alive

November 30, 1997

SOME OF THE VEHICLES were almost out of ammunition. They had expended thousands of rounds. One of the 24 Somalian prisoners had been shot dead and another was wounded. The back ends of the remaining trucks and humvees in the lost convoy were slick with blood. Chunks of viscera clung to floors and inner walls.

The second humvee in line was dragging an axle and was being pushed by the five-ton truck behind it. Another humvee had three flat tires and two dozen bullet holes. SEAL Sgt. Howard Wasdin, who had been shot in both legs, had them draped up over the dash and stretched out on the hood. Yet another humvee had a grenade hole in the side and four flat tires.

They were shooting at everything now. They had abandoned their new mission - to rescue downed pilot Cliff Wolcott and then try to reach pilot Mike Durant's crash site. Now they were fighting just to stay alive as the convoy wandered into one ambush after another, trying to find its way back to base.

Up in a humvee turret and behind a Mark 19, a machine gun grenade launcher, Spec. James Cavaco was pumping one big round after another into the windows of a building from which they were taking fire. It was hard to shoot the Mark 19 accurately, but Cavaco was dropping grenades neatly into the second-story windows one after another. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

From his seat in the second five-ton, Spec. Eric Spalding shouted out to his friend: "Yeah! Get 'em, 'Vaco!"

It was just after that when Cavaco, firing to his left down an alleyway, slumped forward. He had taken a round to the back of his head and was dead. Spalding helped load him on the back of the truck. They tossed his body up and it landed on the legs of an injured Ranger in back, who let out a shriek.

Sgt. Paul Leonard, one of the Commando soldiers, stepped up behind Cavaco's Mark 19. He was even more of an expert shot. The big 40mm rounds were designed to penetrate two inches of steel before

exploding. As Leonard fired, the rounds screamed right through the bodies of Somalian gunmen and exploded farther down the street.

But not long after he took over the gun, a bullet came through the side window of the humvee and took off the back of Leonard's left leg just below the knee. He was standing in the turret, so all the men in the humvee were splattered with tissue and blood. The muscles of his leg hung open in oozing flaps. But Leonard was still standing, and still shooting. A Ranger tied a tourniquet around his leg.

The convoy was taking a beating, but it was also leaving a terrible swath of dead and wounded Somalis in its wake.

In another humvee, Pfc. Tory Carlson was shooting out the back, his .50-cal machine gun rocking the vehicle, when he saw three Somalian men cross the big gun's range. Their bodies went flying, and as the rounds kept coming the bodies skipped and bounced along the ground until they were thrown against a wall. Then the men came apart.

Carlson was watching with horror and satisfaction when he felt a sudden blow and sharp pain in his right knee. It felt as if someone had taken a knife and held it to his knee and then driven it in with a sledgehammer. Carlson glanced down and saw blood rapidly staining his pants. He said a prayer and kept shooting. He had been wildly scared for longer now than he had ever been in his life, and now it was somehow worse. His heart banged in his chest and he found it hard to breathe and he thought he might die right then of fright.

His head was filled with the sounds of shooting and explosions and the visions of his friends going down, one by one. Blood splashed everywhere, oily and sticky with its dank, coppery smell. He figured, This is it for me. And then, in that moment of maximum terror, he felt it all abruptly, inexplicably fall away. He had stopped caring about himself. He would think about this a lot later, and his best explanation was that he no longer mattered, even to himself. He had passed through some sort of barrier. He had to keep fighting, because the other guys, his buddies, were all that mattered.

Spalding was sitting next to the passenger door in his truck with his rifle out the window, turned in the seat so he could line up his shots, when he was startled by a sudden flash of light down by his legs. It looked as if a laser beam had shot through the door and up into his right leg. Actually, a bullet had pierced the steel of the door and the window, which was rolled down, and had poked itself and fragments of glass and steel straight up his leg from just above his knee to his

hip. He let out a squeal.

"What's wrong, you hit?" shouted the truck's driver, Pvt. 2 John Maddox.

"Yes!"

And then another laser poked through, this one into Spalding's left leg. He felt a jolt this time but no pain. He reached down to grab his right thigh, and blood spurted out between his fingers. Still Spalding felt no pain. He didn't want to look at it.

Then Maddox began shouting, "I can't see! I can't see!"

Spalding turned to see Maddox's helmet askew and his glasses knocked sideways on his head.

"Put your glasses on, you dumb ass."

But Maddox had been hit in the back of the head. The round must have hit his helmet, which saved his life, but hit with such force that it had rendered him temporarily blind. The truck was rolling out of control, and Spalding, with both legs shot, couldn't move over to grab the wheel.

They couldn't stop right in the field of fire, so there was nothing to do but shout directions to Maddox, who still had his hands on the wheel.

"Turn left! Turn left! Now! Now!"

"Speed up"

"Slow down!"

The truck was weaving and banging into the sides of buildings. It ran over a Somalian man on crutches.

"What was that?" asked Maddox.

"Don't worry about it. We just ran over somebody."

And they laughed. They felt no pity and were beyond fear. They were both laughing as Maddox stopped the truck.

One of the Delta men, Sgt. Mike Foreman, ran up and opened the driver's side door to find the cab splattered with Spalding's blood.

"Holy s-!" he said.

Maddox slid over next to Spalding, who was examining his wounds. There was a perfectly round hole in his left knee, but no exit wound. The bullet had fragmented on impact with the door and glass, and only the metal jacket had penetrated his knee. It had flattened on impact with his kneecap and just slid around under the skin to the side of the joint. The rest of the bullet had peppered his lower leg, which was bleeding. Spalding propped both legs up on the dash and pressed a field dressing on one. He lay his rifle on the rim of the side window and changed the magazine. As Foreman got the truck moving again, Spalding resumed firing. He was shooting at anything that moved.

Spalding's buddy, Pfc. Clay Othic, was wedged between driver and passenger in the truck behind them when Pfc. Richard Kowalewski, who was driving, was hit in the shoulder. He absorbed the blow and kept on steering.

"Alphabet, want me to drive?" asked Othic. Kowalewski was nicknamed ``Alphabet," for his long surname.

"No, I'm OK."

Othic was struggling in the confined space to apply a pressure dressing to Alphabet's bleeding shoulder when a grenade rocketed in from the left. It severed Alphabet's left arm and ripped into his torso. It didn't explode. Instead the two-foot-long missile was embedded in Alphabet's chest, the fins protruding from his left side under his missing arm, the point sticking out the right side. He was killed instantly.

The driverless truck crashed into the rear of the truck ahead, the one with the prisoners in back and with Foreman, Maddox and Spalding in the cab. The impact threw Spalding against the side door, and his truck rolled off and veered into a wall.

Othic, who had been sitting between Alphabet and Spec. Aaron Hand when the grenade hit, was knocked unconscious. He snapped back awake when Hand shook him, yelling that he had to get out.

"It's on fire!" Hand shouted.

The cab was black with smoke, and Othic could see a fuse glowing from what looked like the inside of Alphabet's body. The grenade lodged in his chest was unexploded, but something had caused a blast.

It might have been a flash bang grenade - a harmless grenade that gives off smoke and makes noise - mounted on Alphabet's armor. Hand got his side door open and swung himself out. Othic reached over to grab Alphabet and pull him out, but the driver's bloody clothes just lifted off his pierced torso.

Othic stumbled out to the street and realized that his and Hand's helmets had been blown off. Hand's rifle had been shattered. They moved numbly and even a little giddily. Alphabet was dead and their helmets had been knocked off, yet they were virtually unscathed by the grenade. Hand couldn't hear out of his left ear, but that was it.

Hand found the lower portion of Alphabet's arm on the street. All that remained intact was the hand. He picked it up and put it in his side pants pocket. He didn't know what else to do, and it didn't feel right leaving it behind.

OTHIC CLIMBED INTO another humvee. As they set off again, he began groping on the floor with his good left hand, collecting rounds that guys had ejected from their weapons when they'd jammed. Then he passed them back to those still shooting.

They found a four-lane road with a median up the center that would lead them back down to the K-4 traffic circle, a major traffic roundabout in southern Mogadishu, and then home. In the truck, Spalding began to lose feeling in his fingertips. For the first time in the ordeal he began to panic. He felt himself going into shock. He saw a little Somalian boy cradling an AK-47, shooting it wildly from the hip. He saw flashes from the muzzle of the gun. Somebody shot the boy. Spalding felt as if everything around him had slowed down to half speed. He saw the boy's legs fly up, as if he had slipped on marbles, and then he was flat on his back.

Foreman, the Commando sergeant, was a hell of a shot. He had his weapon in one hand and the steering wheel in the other. Spalding saw him gun down three Somalian men without even slowing down.

Spalding felt his fingers curling and his hands stiffening. His forearm had been shattered by a bullet earlier.

"Hey, man, let's get the hell back," Spalding said. "I'm not doing too good."

"You're doing cool," Foreman said. "You'll be all right. Hang in there."

A humvee driven by SEAL Homer Nearpass was now in the lead. It was shot up and smoking, running on three rims. One dead and eight wounded Rangers were in the back. Wasdin, the wounded SEAL sergeant, had his bloody legs splayed out on the hood (he'd been shot once more, in the left foot).

They came upon a big roadblock. The Somalis had stretched two huge underground gasoline tanks across the roadway along with other debris, and had set it all on fire. Afraid to stop the humvee for fear it would not start up again, Nearpass shouted to the driver to just ram through it.

They crashed over and through the flaming debris, nearly landing on their side, but the sturdy humvee righted itself and kept on going. The rest of the column followed.

Staff Sgt. Matt Eversmann, the leader of a Ranger unit that had been rescued by the convoy, was curled up on one of the back passenger seats of his humvee, training his weapon out the window. At every intersection he saw Somalis who would open fire on any vehicle that came across. Because they had men on both sides of the street, any rounds that missed the vehicles as they flashed past would certainly have hit the Somalis on the other side of the road. What tactics, Eversmann thought. He felt these people must have no regard for even their own lives. They just did not care.

In his vehicle, Othic was on all fours now, groping around on the floor of the humvee with his good hand, looking for unspent shells. They were just about out of ammo.

As they approached K-4 circle, they all braced themselves for another vicious ambush.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 16

Furious attacks on a second convoy

December 1, 1997

AS SOON AS Staff Sgt. Jeff Struecker drove his humvee out of the American beachfront compound, gunfire erupted all around. They weren't more than 80 yards out the back gate.

"Action left!" Sgt. Raleigh Cash screamed from the passenger seat of Struecker's humvee at the head of the convoy.

Struecker's turret gunner swung around to face five Somalis with weapons. Cash heard the explosion of gunfire and the zing and pop of rounds passing close. He had been taught that if you heard that crack, it meant the bullet had passed within three feet of your head. A zing, which sounded to him like the sound made when you hit a telephone pole guy wire with a stick, meant the bullet had missed you by a far margin.

The shots were answered by a roaring fusillade from the men in the convoy.

This column - four humvees and three five-ton flatbed trucks - had been hastily assembled to rescue the crew of pilot Mike Durant's downed Blackhawk. A larger convoy already in Mogadishu also had been ordered to rescue Durant, along with pilot Cliff Wolcott and his crashed Blackhawk crew. But the original convoy had finally given up and started back to base after wandering through the city under heavy fire, absorbing terrible casualties.

The Durant crash site was less than two miles from the base, but Struecker realized already that he would have to fight street by street to get there. They were driving out into hell.

The brunt of the shooting was aimed at Struecker's lead vehicle. A rocket-propelled grenade scraped across the top of his humvee and exploded against a concrete wall. The concussion lifted the wide-bodied vehicle up on two wheels.

Clearly these Somalis didn't know how to stage a proper ambush. The correct way was to let the lead vehicle pass and suck in the whole column, then open fire. The unarmored flatbed trucks in the middle, loaded with cooks and clerks and other volunteers, made vulnerable targets. But even with undisciplined enemy gunfire, going forward would invite slaughter.

He told his driver to throw the humvee in reverse. Everybody behind him was just going to have to figure it out. They rammed the humvee behind them, and then that driver rammed the truck behind him. Eventually they all got the message.

Struecker got on the radio to the officer directing him from a helicopter circling high above the city:

You need to find a different route!

The answer came back: Go back where you came from and turn right instead of left. You can get there that way.

Struecker got the whole column back up to the gate, and this time he steered out the opposite way. He drove straight into a roadblock, a big one. The Somalis had thrown up dirt, junk, chunks of concrete and wire.

http://www3.phillynews.com/packages/somalia/graphics/2nov16.asp

http://www3.phillynews.com/packages/somalia/graphics/2nov16.aspThe convoy knew Durant's Super 64 was somewhere directly ahead. Where he lay beside his helicopter, Durant had heard the sound of the .50-cal on Struecker's humvee and figured the rescue column was coming in. This was minutes before Durant's site was overrun and he was taken captive.

But the convoy couldn't advance. Beyond the roadblock was a concrete wall surrounding the vast ghetto of huts and walking paths into which Durant had crashed. The humvees could roll right over the roadblock but Struecker knew the five-ton trucks wouldn't make it. And even if they did, there wasn't going to be any way through the concrete wall.

You'll have to find us another route, Struecker radioed to his guide high above.

There ain't another route.

Well, you need to find one. Figure out a way to get there, Struecker said.

The only other route is to go all the way around the city and come in through the back side.

Fine. We'll take it.

It seemed to take forever for the five-tons to turn around on the narrow street. As they struggled to reverse direction again, most of the Rangers were out on the street, providing security in all directions. The trucks weren't delicate about turning around. They rammed into walls and ground gears.

On one knee in the street, Cash took a whack to his chest that almost knocked him over. He knew he'd been shot, and he ran his hand inside his shirt, looking for blood. There was none. The bullet had skimmed off the front of his chest plate, tearing the straps of his load-bearing harness so that it was now hanging by threads.

Spec. Peter Squeglia, the company armorer who had donned fighting gear and volunteered for the convoy, sat with his M-16 pointed out the passenger side window of a truck, suddenly wondering what he was doing there. Only a year earlier, he had been bar-hopping with his buddies in Rhode Island trying to pick up girls.

A bullet clipped off the side mirror on the driver's side. Squeglia pointed his rifle across the cab, right in front of the driver, and squeezed off several rounds.

When they were at last turned around, the convoy sped out a road that skirted the city to the southwest, driving through an occasional hail of AK-47 fire. At one rise they could actually see Durant's crash site. It was less than a quarter of a mile away, down in a little valley, inside a squalid rag hut village. There was no way to get closer. They kept driving on their roundabout course until they came to the K-4 traffic circle, one of the major traffic intersections in southern Mogadishu.

Here they met up with the smoking, limping, bleeding remnants of Lt. Col. Danny McKnight's lost convoy. It was a remarkable sight. The lead humvee was smoking and all of its tires were flat. The ones that followed looked almost as bad, and Struecker's men were shocked to

see that the vehicles were loaded with dead and shot-up Rangers.

The fresh convoy surrounded the battered vehicles, setting up a perimeter of fire while casualties on the worst of the vehicles were moved to the intact ones. They were less than a mile from the base, and less than a mile from Durant. One look at the lost convoy made it clear that they weren't going to be able to break through Somalian roadblocks with just humvees and flatbed trucks.

So while the Command helicopter continued to reassure Delta soldiers who were holding off the mob around Durant's downed Blackhawk that help was just minutes away, the two convoys were already headed the opposite way.

THE MEN IN THE LOST convoy had braced themselves for another vicious fight at K-4. But as they limped through the flaming barricades on Via Lenin, they saw instead, to their enormous relief, Jeff Struecker's line of fresh vehicles and troops approaching them.

The lead humvee driven by SEAL Homer Nearpass, carrying John Gay and Howard Wasdin, with Wasdin's bloody legs draped over the dash, could go no further. The dead and wounded were lifted from it and loaded on another humvee. Before they torched the battered vehicle, to prevent Somalis from looting it, Nearpass counted the bullet holes and Gay rooted around inside to find the handle of the broken knife that had saved his life by deflecting a bullet.

Squeglia saw his friend Sgt. Casey Joyce being lifted out of one of the vehicles, his eyes wide but empty, his mouth open. Joyce looked as if he was screaming, but he was dead. It really shook Squeglia. He and Joyce had been pals. Both of them were big guys, bulkier than most of the Rangers. They had shared a particular hatred for the daily morning run that seemed so easy for thinner Rangers. Now Casey was dead.

Then Sgt. Scott Galentine, normally a cheerful, funny guy, emerged from the back of a truck looking pale and shocked, still clutching his severed thumb in his bloody hand. The tough old master sergeant they called "Grizz," Tim Martin, had been cut almost in half by a rocket-propelled grenade, but he was still, somehow, alive. Pfc. Adalberto Rodriguez was a bloody, broken mess, barely alive. The tough little ex-boxer, Sgt. Lorenzo Ruiz, had a breathing tube in his chest. On the litter he looked diminished, scared and small.

The dead and wounded were headed home, but they weren't out of danger yet.

Sgt. Cash, now in the third humvee, saw a Somali with an RPG launcher pop up from behind a brick wall. There was a bright flash and a bang.

At the same moment, in the back of the humvee, Spec. Dale Sizemore had spotted a row of Somalis, their heads poking over a concrete wall. He had thrown himself backward in order to get a better shot at them when he felt the vehicle lurch. The blast underneath threw the humvee in the air. The men inside felt their stomachs drop. It was as if they had flown off the end of a ramp.

They crashed back to earth on all four wheels, unharmed and still moving. With no time to react to what had just happened, Cash pointed to a Somalian gunner up a tree. Both Sizemore and the humvee's .50-cal gunner started blasting away. A Somali fell out of the tree to the street.

Then Cash felt a jab in the leg. He thought he'd been shot. He looked down and saw instead that a bullet had poked through the metal door of the humvee and had been caught by the window, which was rolled down, forming a second layer inside the door. The bulletproof glass had stretched out under the round's impact to form what looked like a horizontal stalactite, four to five inches long. The tip of it had nudged Cash's leg. He could see the bullet lodged inside the point. He marveled at it momentarily, then broke it off with the butt of his rifle and resumed shooting.

They shot their way back to the base, blasting everything they saw. Rules of engagement were off. Sizemore saw young boys, 7 and 8 years old, some with weapons, some without. He shot them all down. He saw women running in crowds alongside men who had rifles, and he mowed down the crowds. He didn't care anymore. He just felt numb - numb and angry and full of fight. He just wanted to hit as many Somalis as he could. He didn't even care anymore if he got shot. These Rangers were his buddies, his best friends in the world, closer to him than family had ever been, and he was going to do anything he could to return them safely.

They hammered every alley in both directions until, just blocks from the gate to the airport, all the shooting ceased. It was as if they had entered a different city. Crowds of Somalis were moving through open

air markets, strolling, chatting, as if nothing had happened. As the vehicles approached, the crowds parted for the battered and bloody column with its crippled humvees and dead, wounded and horror-stricken soldiers. And as the soldiers moved the last hundred yards to the gate, Squeglia couldn't believe what he was seeing. The Somalis in the street all turned to face them, grinning, and they applauded.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 17

At first crash site, more bodies

December 2, 1997

JUST EIGHT MINUTES after Cliff Wolcott's Blackhawk went down, a Blackhawk carrying a rescue team moved over the crash site in south Mogadishu. Inside were 15 men who had trained for months as a combat search-and-rescue unit. Their specialty was saving downed pilots.

But even professionals who practice the same moves a thousand times can overlook a detail in the heat of an actual mission. The team hit the fast ropes perfectly and slid down. It was the last man out, Air Force Tech. Sgt. Tim Wilkinson, who noticed that their medical kits had been left behind.

The oversight delayed Wilkinson's slide down the rope. He had to wait until the men 30 feet below him reached the ground and got out of the way. Only then was it safe to throw down the kit bags. By the time he reached the rope, the timing was off by several crucial seconds.

It was just enough time to leave the big Blackhawk exposed to fire from crowds of Somalis converging on Wolcott's crash site. As pilot Dan Jollota held his hover and Wilkinson slid down the rope, a rocket-propelled grenade exploded on the left side of the airframe. The Blackhawk was knocked slightly sideways, as if absorbing a roundhouse punch. Jollota instinctively began to pull up and away.

Coming out. I think we have been hit, Jollota radioed to the command helicopter circling overhead.

You have been hit . . . Behind your engines . . . Be advised you are smoking.

One of the crew chiefs screamed into the radio: We still have people on the ropes!

Hanging on the rope below Wilkinson was Master Sgt. Scott Fales. Wilkinson heard the explosion above, but he was so intent on negotiating his descent that he never felt the rope pull forward and up. He didn't learn until much later how Jollota's composure had saved his and Fales' lives.

In the cockpit, Jollota could hear his rotor blades whistling. Shrapnel from the blast had poked holes in them. The aircraft started to slosh from side to side. Instinct and training dictated that he move away the instant he was hit. But Jollota eased the Blackhawk back down to a hover for the few more seconds Wilkinson and Fales needed to clear the ropes.

Despite the brown dust cloud below, Jollota's crew could see both men reach the ground safely. He pulled up and away. He eased the Blackhawk back toward the main base three miles away, trailing a thin gray plume of smoke. Limping the last mile, Jollota plowed the heavy Blackhawk into the base landing strip. The bird came down with a quick roll right on the landing wheels. They hit with a jolt, but the bird stayed upright and intact. They walked away.

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http://www3.phillynews.com/packages/somalia/graphics/dec02.asp

WILKINSON HEARD the snap of rounds passing nearby as soon as he hit the ground. It was hot, and in the cloud of dust he couldn't see. He ran to the right side of the street and waited for the dust to settle.

He tried to orient himself. He couldn't see Wolcott's downed Blackhawk or the rest of his rescue team. The only thing he saw was the medical bags, still lying in the middle of the street. He ran out and snatched up both bags.

Still running, he rounded a corner and stumbled upon the wrecked Blackhawk. The size of it stunned him. He was accustomed to seeing the choppers in the air or on spacious tarmacs. In this narrow alley it looked tragic, like a harpooned whale, beached on its left side.

Wilkinson was surprised to see that the Rangers and D-boys from his

rescue unit had already set up a tight perimeter around the crash site. Scattered around were the bodies of several Somalis, and in the distance there were many more. He couldn't see inside Super 61 to determine if the eight men who had been aboard were still alive.

Near him, a Ranger, Sgt. Alan Barton, shot two Somalis as they rounded the corner, a man with an M-16 and a woman with him. Barton picked up the Somali's rifle, clicked a magazine into it, and took it with him.

At the front of the helicopter, Wilkinson's team leader, Sgt. Fales, was stretching up to peer inside and check for survivors when he felt a tug at his left pants leg. Then came the pain. It felt like a hot poker stabbing through his calf muscle. Fales, a big, broad-faced man who had fought in Panama and during the Persian Gulf war, felt anger with the pain. He had trained years for a moment like this, and after less than three minutes on the ground he'd been shot.

He hopped back away, grimacing. Bullets whizzed and snapped up the adjacent alley. A Commando medic came over to help, and Fales hobbled back toward the rear of the helicopter. He nearly bowled over Wilkinson, who was making his way forward.

``What's up?" Wilkinson asked, startled.

``I've been shot," Fales said. ``Rat bastards shot me."

Fales ducked into a deep hole that the crashing helicopter had left in the alley wall. He cut open his pants and saw that the bullet had passed through his calf muscle and out the front of his leg. Nothing was broken. By the look of it, with flaps of muscle tissue spilled out of the wound, Fales figured it ought to hurt badly. But other than the stabbing sensation right after he'd been shot, there was little pain. He figured his fear and adrenaline were acting as an anesthetic.

He folded the muscle tissue back into the wound, packed some gauze into it, and applied a pressure dressing. Then he crawled back out into the alley, finding cover in a small, cup-shaped space behind the main body of the helicopter created by its bent tail boom.

Fales' wound heightened Wilkinson's sense of urgency. He had thought they would have a few minutes to set up before coming under attack. In past missions, it had usually taken 10 to 20 minutes for a Somalian crowd to gather around any action on the streets. But now they had to mount their rescue under immediate heavy fire.

Wilkinson assumed Lt. Col. Danny McKnight's ground convoy would be pulling up at any minute; he had no way of knowing that the convoy was hopelessly lost and getting hammered. He and his team would need to get the wounded and dead out of the helicopter, treat the wounded, and have the men on litters by the time the vehicles approached. But he hadn't even been inside the helicopter yet, and now his rescue team leader was wounded.

Wilkinson moved quickly to the front of the helicopter. A Commando soldier, Sgt. James McMahon, who was aboard Wolcott's Super 61 when it crashed, was already on top of the bird, pulling out copilot Donovan ``Bull'' Briley. McMahon's face was badly cut and swollen from the impact of the crash. It was purple and black. He looked as if he were wearing a fright mask.

Briley was obviously dead. On impact something had sliced through his head, angling up from just under his chin. His body was relatively easy to reach because he was strapped in the right seat, which was now on the high side. Wilkinson helped McMahon pull Briley up and out, and then handed his body down to two sergeants. They carried him over to the designated casualty collection point, the protected space where Fales had crawled.

McMahon climbed down into the cockpit and checked on pilot Cliff ``Elvis'' Wolcott.

``He's dead,'' he told Wilkinson.

Since McMahon was not a medic, Wilkinson felt the need to see for himself. He told McMahon to get some medical attention for his face, and then he climbed up into the bird.

It was eerily quiet inside. There had been no fire, and there was no smoke. Everything inside that hadn't been strapped down had been violently thrown around and had come to rest on the left side, which was now the bottom. There was a slight odor of fuel inside, where various liquids were draining down. He dipped his finger in the fluid and sniffed. It wasn't fuel.

Wilkinson was suspended upside down as he reached in and felt Wolcott's carotid artery for a pulse. He was dead. He and Briley had taken the brunt of the impact, and Wolcott, because his side had hit the ground, had gotten the worst of it. The whole front end of the helicopter had folded in on him from the waist down. He was still in

his seat, and his head and upper torso were intact, but the nose and instrument panel and crumpled front end of the aircraft had collapsed into his lap.

Now the rescue team had to figure out a way to cut Elvis out of there. They were not leaving without him. They would not consider it. They did not leave their dead on the battlefield.

Wilkinson tried to slide his hand to grab the pilot's legs, but there wasn't space. He could not be lifted or pulled free. Wilkinson then slid completely into the helicopter and crawled back behind the pilot's seat to see if Elvis could be pulled back and out that way, but that vantage looked no better.

He climbed out and got down on the dirt by the smashed left underside of the cockpit, digging to see if there was a way to create an opening underneath the wreck so that Elvis' body could be extracted. But the Blackhawk had plowed hard into the soil. There would be no easy way to get the body out.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 18

Rescue team comes under fierce fire

December 3, 1997

Sgt. TIM WILKINSON climbed back into the wrecked helicopter to see whether he could get more leverage to free the body of pilot Cliff Wolcott. Perhaps there was some way he hadn't seen at first to pull the pilot seat back and get more room and a better angle. But after a while he saw that it was hopeless.

He crawled out of the cockpit of Blackhawk Super 61, and, kneeling on top of it, he peered through the open right side doors into the main cargo area. They had accounted for the pilots - both dead - and one of the crew chiefs, who was injured. Wilkinson knew some of the guys from Super 61 had been rescued by a Little Bird that had landed and loaded up survivors.

He thought everyone was out of the wreck, so now he was looking for any sensitive equipment, weapons or papers to be removed. As a

member of a highly trained rescue team, he had been taught to quickly erase the memory banks of any electronic equipment that held important data. In this case, he didn't want Somalis taking classified stuff once Wolcott's body was recovered and the Americans had pulled out.

All the avionics equipment and every piece of gear that hadn't been strapped down had come to rest at the left side of the aircraft, which was now the bottom. In the heap Wilkinson noticed a scrap of desert battle dress uniform.

"There's somebody else in there," he told Sgt. First Class Bob Mabry, a Commando medic standing alongside the wreck.

Wilkinson leaned in farther and saw an arm and a flight glove. He called down into the wreck, and a finger of the flight glove moved. Wilkinson climbed back into the wreckage and began pulling the debris and equipment off the man buried there.

It was the left side gunner, Staff Sgt. Ray Dowdy. He was still in his seat. Part of the seat had been snapped off its hinges, but it was basically intact and in place.

When Wilkinson freed Dowdy's arm from under the pile, the crew chief was sufficiently alert to start helping to shove things away. Dowdy still hadn't spoken and was clearly dazed and disoriented. The last thing he remembered was noticing he didn't have his seat belt fastened before hitting the ground.

Wilkinson was throwing things off and prying things back. He reached in to help Dowdy pull free of the seat. Mabry crawled down under the wreck and tried without success to make his way in through the bottom right-side doorway to reach Dowdy from below. He gave up and climbed in through the upper doors just as Wilkinson freed Dowdy.

The three men were standing inside the wreck when a storm of bullets tore through the skin of the craft. Mabry and Wilkinson danced involuntarily, hopping away from the sharp burst of snapping and crashing noises. Dowdy saw the tips of two fingers shot off, just the tip of his index finger and about half the first digit of his middle finger. He felt no pain and said nothing. Bits and pieces of debris were flying around them. To Wilkinson it looked like a sudden snowstorm. Then it stopped.

Wilkinson remembers noting, first, that he was still alive. Then he checked himself. He'd been hit in the face and arm. It felt as if he'd been slapped or punched in the chin. Everyone had been hit. Mabry had been hit in the hand. Wilkinson looked at Dowdy. The crew chief's eyes were open wide, with a blank look. He was staring at his bloody hand.

Wilkinson put his hand over Dowdy's bleeding fingertip and said: "OK, let's get out of here!"

Mabry tore up the bullet-resistant floor panels and propped them up over the side of the craft where the bullets had burst through. To avoid the gunfire outside, Mabry and Wilkinson tunneled out of the aircraft, digging wider a hole where the rear corner of the left side door was above ground. They slid Dowdy out that way.

Then the two medics went back inside for a few more minutes, searching for more equipment to destroy. Mabry set to work handing out the bullet-resistant panels from the interior, which were being placed around the tail of the aircraft where a wounded sergeant, Scott Fales, had established a casualty collection point.

Fire was coming from all directions, but mostly straight up and down the alley. They were still expecting the arrival of the ground convoy at any moment. They had no way of knowing that the convoy was lost and taking heavy casualties.

Fales was too busy shooting from his position out by the tail to take notice of the placement of the floor panels. He had a pressure dressing on his calf and an IV tube in his arm.

"Scott, why don't you get behind the Kevlar [floor panels]?" Wilkinson asked. Fales looked startled. Only now did he notice the barricade.

"Good idea," he said.

Crouched down behind the panels, Wilkinson and Fales watched as the intense gunfire ripped first one hole through the tail boom, then another. Then another.

Wilkinson was reminded of the Steve Martin movie The Jerk, where Martin's moronic character, unaware that villains are shooting at him, watches with surprise as bullet holes begin popping open a row of oil cans. Wilkinson shouted Martin's line from the movie.

"They hate the cans! Stay away from the cans!'

Both men laughed.

After patching up a few more men - the wounded boys who had been in the crash, Dowdy, and his fellow crew chief - Wilkinson crawled back up into the cockpit from underneath, to see again if there was some way of pulling Wolcott's body down and out.

There wasn't.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 19

A desperate battle to hold the crash site

December 4, 1997

http://www3.phillynews.com/packages/somalia/soldiers/photo5.asphttp://www3.phillynews.com/packages/somalia/soldiers/photo5.asp

A Somali street near the target on the morning of Oct. 3, 1993.

THINGS WERE SO QUIET at the northeast corner of the target building that Staff Sgt. Ed Yurek got spooked. He was feeling abandoned and alone. Half of his Chalk Two had run off to help rescue the downed crew of Cliff Wolcott's helicopter. Yurek was left with just half a dozen Rangers.

Once the ground convoy had rolled away from the target house with the 24 Somalian prisoners, there wasn't much left for Yurek and his men to do. He decided to radio the Chalk leader, First Lt. Tom DiTomasso, for guidance. He was afraid the entire assault force had taken off and left them.

DiTomasso's voice came over the radio: You need to find your way to me.

The lieutenant and his men had fought their way to Wolcott's

Blackhawk. Now, an hour into the mission, he wanted Yurek and the rest of Chalk Two to run the same gauntlet: three terrifying blocks, with Somalis firing madly down the alleyways in every direction.

Reluctantly, they abandoned the relative safety of their position and began moving east down an alley about 10 yards wide. Ahead they heard the sounds of pitched battle. Yurek stayed away from the walls. One of the boys had warned him that walls act as funnels for bullets. Rounds would ride walls for hundreds of feet. Huddling tight against a wall, while instinctual, was as dangerous as standing in the middle of the street.

As soon as the little group stepped out to move, the Somalis opened up. Gunmen popped up in windows, in doorways and around corners, spraying bursts of automatic fire. At each intersection the Rangers stopped and covered one another. Yurek ran while his men laid suppressive fire north and south. Then they ran while he covered them. In this way they leapfrogged across each street.

Yurek shot one man in a doorway just 10 feet away. The man had stepped out and taken aim. He was a bushy-haired, dusty man with baggy brown pants. He didn't shoot instantly, and that's what killed him. Yurek's eyes met his for an instant as he pulled the trigger. The Somali pitched forward without getting off a shot.

It struck Yurek how similar killing a man was to shooting targets in training. In practice, targets would pop out unexpectedly. The rules were to shoot at blue triangles, but to hold fire if a green square appeared. Now, in actual battle, he had seen a target, identified it, and taken it out. He was grateful for all the tedious hours of training.

The fire grew so intense down the alley that Yurek was surprised that none of his men was hurt. They turned a corner three blocks down, and there was the crash site. The other half of their Chalk had set up a small perimeter. Lt. DiTomasso was crouched behind a green Volkswagen. Chalk Two's M-60 gunner, Shawn Nelson, had taken cover behind another car and a tree across the street.

Yurek sprinted to DiTomasso. As he crouched to speak to the lieutenant, the Volkswagen began rocking from the impact of heavy rounds. Somebody with a very powerful weapon had a bead on them. The rounds were slicing through the car.

Yurek shouted across the street. Maybe Nelson had a better vantage point. ``What is it?'' he shouted.

``It's a big gun!" Nelson called back.

Yurek and DiTomasso looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

``Where is it?" Yurek shouted.

Nelson pointed up the street, and Yurek edged out to look around the car. He saw three dead Somalis in the dirt. He stacked them into a little mound. Sliding out into the street behind the bodies, he was able to get a better view. Now he could see all the way up the street, where two Somalis were stretched out on the ground behind a big gun mounted on a tripod. From that position, they could control the whole street.

Yurek had a LAW, a light antitank weapon, strapped to his back. He'd been carrying it around on every mission for weeks. It was a disposable plastic launcher weighing only three pounds. He unstrapped the weapon and climbed up and leaned forward on the Volkswagen. He took aim through flip-up crosshairs.

The rocket launched with a powerful back blast. Yurek watched it zoom in on the target and explode with a flash and a loud whoom! The big Somalian gun flipped into the air.

Yurek was accepting congratulations from the other Rangers when the thunk thunk thunk resumed against the car. The rocket had evidently landed just short, close enough to send the weapon flying and kick up a cloud of dirt, but not close enough to destroy the gun or kill the gunners.

He saw them up the street now, kneeling behind the gun, which they had righted again on the tripod. Yurek picked up another LAW that someone had discarded. It was bent and crushed. He couldn't get it to open up. So he loaded a fist-sized M203 round into the grenade-launching tube mounted under the barrel of his M-16.

This time his aim was better. He could actually see the fat 203 round spiral into the target. The two Somalis toppled over sideways in opposite directions. When the smoke cleared, Yurek could see the gun just lying there between the two dead gunners. No one else came out to get it. For the rest of the day, until just past dusk, Yurek kept a good eye on that gun.

AT THE CRASH SITE, Spec. Rob Phipps was feeling edgy. He was all alone, crouching next to the hole in the stone wall where Wolcott's

Blackhawk had hit on its way down. At 22, Phipps was the youngest of the men who had roped down on the combat search-and-rescue team. He would feel a lot better, he thought, if he had some of the veterans around him.

He got on his hand-held radio and called Sgt. First Class Al Lamb to ask for help. Lamb, 32, was an experienced member of the rescue team. He had taken cover on the other side of the Blackhawk, in one of the holes where the Somalis dumped their household garbage.

Before Lamb could respond, Phipps noticed a Ranger sergeant, Steven Lycopolus, move up and take cover across the alley. Within minutes, to Phipps' relief, Lamb and several Rangers from Chalk Two also moved into position around the downed helicopter.

Their job was to pick off gunmen who were sending an almost steady flow of rounds up the alleyway, and to prevent any from approaching the crash site. Phipps saw a man in a loose white shirt and sandals creeping up the alleyway, crouching with his AK-47 held forward. Phipps shot him and he fell to the road. Minutes later, another Somali ran out to retrieve the gun. Phipps shot him. Then another man ran out to get the weapon. Phipps shot him, too.

Rounds were chipping the walls around him, and he could hear them puncturing the helicopter's thin metal hull. They were coming from a clump of trees about 20 yards away. Lamb told the men to heave some grenades over the wall. A Ranger lit up the trees with his SAW while Phipps and some of the other Rangers flung grenades.

There were explosions, then silence. Then one of the grenades they had thrown came flying back. The Ranger who threw it had forgotten to take the safety strap off.

"Grenade!" several voices screamed.

Phipps dived away from it. The explosion was like a gut punch. It sucked all the air out of him. He felt as if he was on fire, and his ears rang from the blast. When the initial ball of fire was gone, he still felt terrible burning on both legs and on his back. His nose and mouth stung with a bitter taste. His face was blackened and bruised, and his eyes had begun to swell shut.

When Phipps regained his senses, he lifted his head to look over his shoulder just as a Somali ran into the roadway and picked up the AK-47 from the pile of dead and wounded where Phipps had been shooting earlier. The man was taking aim at him when one of the D-

boys back by the wall dropped him with a quick burst. The man's head just came apart.

A Commando medic shouted at Phipps from the hole in the wall across the alley. If Phipps could move, it wouldn't be necessary to brave fire retrieving him.

"Come on! Come on!" the medic urged.

Phipps tried to stand, but his left leg gave out. He tried again and fell again. He started to crawl. He still felt a fierce burning along his back and legs, and his left leg wasn't working right. When he crawled close enough, the medic grabbed his face and pulled him the rest of the way in.

"Holy s-! I'm hit! I got shot! I got shot!" Phipps screamed.

"You're all right," the medic reassured him. ``You'll be all right."

He tore open Phipps' pants and applied a field dressing. The young Ranger joined the growing ranks of the wounded at Crash Site One.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 20

Uneasy partners under heavy fire

December 5, 1997

MINUTES AFTER orders came for the Rangers and Commando teams to make their way on foot to Cliff Wolcott's crash site, the formations broke down. The boys moved out on their own. Some of the Rangers ran to catch up with them, but others fell behind, uncertain and confused.

Capt. Mike Steele, the Ranger commander, was outraged. They had gone just two blocks from their original positions at the target house, and already unit integrity had collapsed. There had been bad blood for weeks between Steele and many of the Commando men. Now it was boiling over in the middle of the worst firefight of their lives.

Steele felt outflanked. He had given orders for the Ranger Chalks to occupy the front and rear positions of an orderly movement of men to the crash site. The Commando teams were to stay in the middle. But a team of boys led by Sgt. First Class Paul Howe took off. Howe, a powerfully built veteran, knew the streets were a killing zone. Staying alive meant moving as if his hair were on fire.

The boys all advanced with such authority that some of the Rangers left their Chalk groupings and just stayed with them. It was reassuring just to be around the more seasoned men.

Petrified by the escalating volume of gunfire, Sgt. Mike Goodale was waiting for his turn to sprint across a street when one of the boys tapped him on the shoulder. Goodale recognized him. It was the short stocky one, Earl, Sgt. First Class Earl Fillmore, a good guy.

Fillmore winked at him and said: ``It's all right, kid. We're coming out of this thing, man."

It calmed Goodale. He believed Fillmore.

Steele watched with mounting distress as his formation broke down. He despised some of the Commando operators for their arrogance and their cocksure bravado. He respected their expertise and courage, but not their professionalism. They were disdainful of authority and discipline, and cavalier toward orders issued by anyone outside their tight, secret fraternity.

For his part, Howe thought Steele was a buffoon - a huge, overmuscled ex-jock still wrapped up in the naive rah-rah of his years playing football for the University of Georgia Bulldogs. Steele was too spit-and-polish for his taste. And Howe, who was 34, considered many of Steele's Rangers little more than frightened, impressionable teenagers.

Now, an hour into the mission, the Rangers and Commando men were operating as separate units under competing commands. They even had different radio connections. Each commando had a radio earpiece under his little plastic hockey-style helmet - Steele called them ``skateboard helmets" - and a microphone that wrapped around to his mouth. The Commando men were in constant touch with one another, but not with the Rangers. The Rangers relied mostly on shouted orders. They hadn't perfected the elaborate hand signals the boys used when the noise of battle drowned out their radio talk.

Poor communications had come into play just minutes into the assault, when one side ended up literally shooting at the other. Howe and his Commando team had been on the roof of the target house, rounding up Somalian prisoners, when they fired at a Somali on a nearby rooftop. They were instantly peppered with return fire - not just from the Somali, but from a Ranger blocking position on the ground. A Ranger had evidently seen shooting from the roof and had fired away without checking it out.

The Commando men weren't hit, but Howe was furious. He got on the radio and told the mission commander to order that idiot Steele to have his men stop shooting at their own people!

Howe's team, with several Rangers in tow, was the first to round the corner on Freedom Road, a wide dirt street that stretched north to the crash site. The road sloped slightly downhill to where the other Rangers and rescue team had established a perimeter two blocks away. The team had just rounded the corner when an RPG hit the wall close by. It knocked some of Howe's team off their feet. Howe felt the wallop of pressure in his ears and chest and dropped to one knee. One of his men had been hit with a small piece of shrapnel to his left side.

They had to find cover to treat the wounded man. Howe abruptly kicked in the door to a one-room house and barged in with his weapon ready. Less-experienced soldiers still felt normal civilian inhibitions about doing things like kicking in doors, but Howe and his men moved as if they owned the world. Every house was their house. If they needed shelter, they kicked in a door. Anyone who threatened them would be shot dead.

The house was empty. Howe and his men caught their breath and reloaded. Running under the weight of their gear was exhausting, and the body armor was like wearing a wet suit. They were sweating profusely and breathing heavily. Howe drew his knife and cut away the back of the wounded man's uniform to check the shrapnel wound. There was a small hole in the man's back, with a swollen, bruised ring around it. There was almost no blood. The swelling had closed the hole.

``You're good to go," Howe told him.

Behind them, Sgt. Goodale moved with a group of Rangers led by First Lt. Larry Perino. Goodale had just turned to squeeze off a round when he felt a stabbing pain. His right leg abruptly seized up and he fell

over backward, right into Perino.

Perino heard Goodale say, ``Ow!''

A bullet had entered his right thigh and passed through him, leaving a gaping exit wound on his right buttock. Goodale thought at that instant about a soldier who supposedly had lost an arm and a leg after a LAW - a light antitank weapon - he was carrying exploded when a round hit it. Goodale was carrying a LAW! He flailed wildly, trying to get the weapon off his shoulder.

Perino couldn't tell what Goodale was doing.

``Where are you hit?'' he asked.

``Right in the ass.''

Goodale dropped the LAW.

Perino left Goodale with a Commando medic and moved on across the intersection. Goodale lay back on the dirt as the medic looked him over.

``You got tagged. You're all right, though. No problem,'' the medic said.

Goodale had the same feeling he used to get in a football game when he got injured. They carried you off the field and you were done. He yanked off his helmet, then saw an RPG fly past no more than six feet in front of him and explode with a stupendous wallop about 20 feet away. He put his helmet back on. The game was most definitely not over.

``We need to get off this street,'' the medic said.

He dragged Goodale into a small courtyard, and several boys hopped in with them. Goodale asked one of them to help him reach his canteen, which the medic had taken off to work on him. The boy fished it out of Goodale's butt pack and discovered a bullet hole clean through it from the same round that had passed through his body. Goodale decided he would keep the canteen as a souvenir.

Capt. Steele and a large contingent of Rangers were the last to make the turn onto Freedom Road. Steele got a radio call from Perino.

``Captain, I've got another man hit.''

``Pick him up and keep moving," Steele said.

The captain was struggling to maintain a semblance of order. He needed to consolidate his Rangers into a single force. Time was essential. Steele had been told the ground convoy would probably reach the crash site before he and his men did. He did not yet know the convoy was lost and being riddled with gunfire. Assuming that the convoy would arrive at any minute, Steele was concerned. He had about 60 young Rangers to account for - and only a vague idea where they all were. He was pondering all this while on his belly in the dirt, his broad face nearly in the sand.

The captain and Sgt. Chris Atwater, Steele's radio operator, were massive men, and they were both trying to take cover behind a tree trunk about a foot wide. In front of them, the last team of boys was moving into the intersection.

Just then one of the boys, Sgt. Fillmore, went limp. His little hockey helmet jerked up and blood came spouting out of his head. He hit the ground, dead.

The boy behind Fillmore grabbed him to pull him back into a narrow alley a few steps away. He, too, was hit - in the neck. A third team member helped the wounded soldier pull Fillmore into the alley.

For the first time that day, Steele felt the gravity of their predicament hit fully home.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 21

A shared quest: Punish the invaders

December 6, 1997

Someone walks through the remains of Kassim Sheik Mohamoud garage.

WHEN THE AMERICAN helicopters opened fire on Kassim Sheik Mohamoud's garage in southern Mogadishu, two of his employees were killed.

Ismail Ahmed was a 30-year-old mechanic, and Ahmad Sheik was a 40-year-old accountant and one of Kassim's right-hand men. Somalian militiamen were hiding inside the garage compound, so Kassim knew they might be bombed. When the shooting started, the beefy businessman had quickly run to the Digfer Hospital to hide. He figured the Americans would not shoot at a hospital.

He stayed there two hours. It sounded as if the whole city were exploding with gunfire. As dusk approached his men brought him news of the two deaths, and because their Islamic faith called for them to bury the dead before sundown, Kassim left the hospital and returned to his garage to lead a burial detail.

He set off for Trabuna Cemetery with three of his men and the bodies of Ismail Ahmad and Ahmad Sheik.

Mogadishu was in turmoil. Buses had stopped running, and all of the major streets were blocked. American helicopters were shooting at anything that moved in the southern portion of the city, so many of the wounded could not be taken to hospitals. Wails of grief and anger rose from many homes, and angry crowds had formed in a broad ring around Cliff Wolcott's Blackhawk, the first of two helicopters that crashed. People swarmed through the streets, seeking vengeance. They wanted to punish the invaders.

Hours earlier, Ali Hassan Mohamed had run to the front door of his family's hamburger and candy shop when the helicopters came down and the shooting started. He was a student, a tall and slender teenager with prominent cheekbones and a sparse goatee. He studied English and business in the mornings, and manned the store in the afternoons just up from the Olympic Hotel.

The front door was diagonal across Hawlwadig Road from the house of Mohamed Hassan Awale, which was the target building where the Rangers were attacking. Peering out his doorway, Ali saw Rangers coming down on ropes. They were big men who wore body armor and strapped their weapons to their chests and painted their faces black and green to look more fierce. They were shooting as soon as they hit the ground. There were also Somalis shooting at them.

Then a helicopter had come low and blasted streams of fire from a gun on its side. Ali's youngest brother, Abdulahi Hassan Mohamed, fell dead by the gate to the family's house, bleeding from the head. He was 15.

Ali ran. People were scrambling everywhere. The streets were crowded with terrified women and children, and there were dead people and dead animals. He saw a woman running naked, waving her arms and screaming. Above was the din of the helicopters, and all around was the crisp popping of gunfire. Out in the streets were militiamen with megaphones. They were shouting, ``Kasoobaxa guryaha oo iska celsa cadowga!" (``Come out and defend your homes!")

Ali belonged to a neighborhood militia organized to protect their shops from bandits. He ran up behind the Olympic Hotel and then doubled back up across Hawlwadig Road to the house of his friend Ahmed, where his AK-47 was hidden. Carrying the gun now, he ran back down behind the hotel, through all the chaos, and retraced his route back to his shop.

Hiding behind the building, he fired his first shots at the Rangers on the corner. He was joined by some of his neighborhood friends, who were all carrying their weapons. When the first helicopter crashed, they moved north, ducking behind cars and buildings. Ali would jump out and spray bullets toward the Rangers, then run for cover. None of them were experienced fighters.

His friend Adan Warsawe was hit in the stomach and knocked flat on his back. Ali helped carry him to cover. He felt afraid but very angry. Who were these men who came to his home spreading death?

WORD THAT THERE WAS big trouble in the city had spread quickly through the Somalian staff at the U.S. Embassy compound in southwestern Mogadishu. Abdikarim Mohamud worked as a secretary for one of the American companies providing support services to the international military force under the United Nations command. This U.N. job was the first chance he had had to use his fluent English.

Like most of his countrymen, Abdikarim had been hopeful about the United Nations when the humanitarian mission started. But when the Rangers came, the attacks began on his Habr Gidr clan and its leader, Gen. Mohamed Farrah Aidid, and every week there was a mounting toll of Somalian dead and injured. He saw it as an unwarranted assault on his country. On July 12, the day of the Abdi Qeybdid House attack, when missiles fired from U.S. helicopters had killed dozens of moderate clan leaders, he had seen victims of the bombing who were brought to the U.S. Embassy compound. The Somalian men, elders of Abdikarim's clan, were bloody and dazed and in need of a doctor. The

Americans photographed them, interrogated them and put them in jail. Abdikarim kept his job but with an added purpose - he became the eyes and ears for his clan.

He knew by the time the assault force took off that afternoon that the Americans were headed for the Bakara Market, and that after they fast-roped in they would not be able to come back out on helicopters. That meant the Americans would be sending a column of vehicles to take them out. Before the Rangers had even roped down to Hawlwadig Road, militiamen were preparing to erect ambushes and roadblocks on the streets around the market.

All Somalian employees at the embassy compound were sent home early by their American employers.

``Something has happened," Abdikarim was told. ``You should go home."

He lived with his family between the K-4 traffic circle, a heavily traveled intersection that was just north of the Ranger base and south of the Bakara Market. The fight was roiling when he left the embassy compound, but there were still buses running on Via Lenin. He could hear the sound of gunfire, and the sky was thick with helicopters speeding low over the rooftops. There were bullets cracking in the air over his head when he got home. He found his father at home with his two brothers and sister. They were all in the courtyard of their home with their backs against a concrete wall, which was the place they always went when bullets started to fly.

It seemed to Abdikarim that there were a hundred helicopters in the sky. The shooting was continuous. Aidid's militia fought from hundreds of places in the densely populated neighborhood. So there were bullets everywhere.

He found that he grew accustomed to the shooting after a while. At first he had crouched down and pressed himself against the wall, but after an hour or so he was restless and moving around the house, looking out windows. Then he ventured outside.

Some of his neighbors told him the Rangers had captured Aidid. He needed to find out what was happening, so he ran up toward the market. He had relatives who lived just a few blocks from the market, and he was eager for news of them. With all the bullets and blasts, it was hard to believe anyone in the market area had not been hit.

When he got close to the shooting, there was terrible confusion on the streets. There were dead people on the road - men, women, children. Abdikarim saw up the street an American soldier lying by the road, bleeding from the leg and trying to hide himself. When a woman ran out in front of Abdikarim, the American fired some shots in their direction. The woman was hit but got off the street. Abdikarim ran around a corner just as one of the Little Bird helicopters flew down the alley, firing. He pressed himself against a stone wall and saw bullets run down the alley, kicking up dust straight past him.

He told himself that coming out to see had been a bad idea. After the helicopter had passed, a group of Somalian men with rifles came running down the alley, toward the corner where they could shoot at the American.

Abdikarim ran to the house of a friend. They let him in, and he got on the floor with everyone else. There was shooting all that night, and they did not sleep at all.

KASSIM SHEIK Mohamoud's little burial convoy got to the cemetery just before dusk. Sounds of gunfire crackled over the city. There were many people at the cemetery digging holes for the newly dead.

As they carried the bodies of Ismail Ahmed and Ahmad Sheik, a helicopter swooped down at them and passed so close that they dropped the bodies and ran away. They hid behind a wall, and when the helicopter continued on, they returned and picked up the bodies.

They carried them to a place on a hill and lay the bodies on the ground and began to dig. They dug until another helicopter buzzed down at them. In fright they ran.

Kassim went back out at 3 a.m. with the men and finished the job. There were many others digging. Mogadishu had become a city of the dead.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 22

A Ranger's plea for help

as the body count climbs

December 7, 1997

SGT. KENNY THOMAS was just a few feet away when Earl Fillmore went down. Thomas had been firing down an alley. He was one of about 70 Rangers and D-boys fighting their way on foot to Cliff Wolcott's downed Blackhawk an hour into the mission. Thomas happened to be looking right at Fillmore when suddenly the back of Fillmore's little hockey helmet blew out.

He saw Fillmore pitch forward on his face. The sight of the tough, confident Commando sergeant stretched out motionless with his nose in the dirt horrified Thomas. As Fillmore was dragged from the line of fire, Thomas went over to Sgt. First Class Sean Watson.

"He needs a Medivac [medical evacuation] or he's going to die," Thomas said.

"There's no way to get him out by helo [helicopter]. No way anybody's getting in here," Watson said.

It was dawning on the men who had moved from the target building toward the crash site that they were now cut off from help. They weren't even sure how far they were from Wolcott's bird. They had split haphazardly into several groups, each pinned down somewhere near the crash site. No one was in charge. Rangers answered to Ranger officers, and Commando commandos answered to their own tight chain of command.

The rescue convoy that was supposed to meet them at the crash site had become hopelessly lost. Shredded by enemy fire, it was about to give up and turn back. The Little Bird gunships buzzing overhead couldn't open fire on Somalian gunmen for fear of hitting American soldiers scattered all around. With two Blackhawks shot down already, no helicopter could safely land to evacuate the mounting number of wounded.

It was too late for Fillmore. He was dead. Thomas realized it, and he broke down sobbing.

Then Pfc. Peter Neathery was hit at the same wall where Fillmore had been shot. Neathery had been on the ground, working his big M-60 gun when he screamed and rolled away, clutching his right arm. Pfc. Vince Errico took over the M-60, and seconds later he let out a yelp.

He, too, had been hit in the right arm. He joined Neathery on the ground. Both were moaning and writhing.

Spec. Richard Strous, a medic, dashed across the street to tend Errico and Neathery, but then he gestured wildly. He'd forgotten his medical kit. The men against the opposite wall all looked at one another. After some discussion, it was decided that Sgt. Jeffrey Hulst would run the kit across. He darted about halfway out into the road and flung the bag. Strous ran back out and retrieved it, then went to work on the two wounded Rangers.

On the same street, Capt. Mike Steele was on the ground, taking cover behind a tin shack. The big Ranger commander had edged up into the same concentrated field of fire that had felled Fillmore and Neathery. He was talking on the radio. Beside him on the ground was his lieutenant, James Lechner.

Sgt. Norm Hooten, a Commando team leader, tried to warn them away. Hooten was standing in the doorway of a courtyard, waving frantically. Steele saw him, but he put up his hand, gesturing for Hooten to wait until he had finished with the radio.

A spray of bullets kicked sand into Steele's eyes. Lechner tried to roll out of the way. Steele saw rounds tear holes through the tin wall behind them, and he heard Lechner scream.

Steele was still rolling when he saw Hooten waving him toward the courtyard. The captain got up and ran for the doorway. There was a lip at the base of the entrance and he tripped over it, sprawling into a small courtyard head-first.

``We've got to get Lechner!'' Steele shouted.

He stood to run back out, but Commando medic Bart Bullock had already dashed out. He and another soldier dragged Lechner through the doorway. The lieutenant's shin had been shattered. He was howling with pain.

Steele grabbed the radio microphone. Shouting, his words delivered in gasped phrases that sharply contrasted with the even voices of the pilots and airborne commanders watching in aircraft high above. Steele didn't even pretend to be calm:

Romeo 64, this is Juliet 64. We're taking heavy small-arms fire. We need relief NOW and start extracting!

In the command helicopter, Lt. Col. Gary Harrell, the mission commander, responded evenly but with some impatience:

I UNDERSTAND you need to be extracted. I've done EVERYTHING I CAN to get those vehicles to you, over.

He, too, was frustrated by the convoy's failure to find the crash site.

Steele responded wearily:

Roger, understand. Be advised command element [Lechner] was just hit. Have more casualties, over.

Sgt. Mike Goodale, who had been pulled into the same courtyard earlier after being shot through the thigh and buttock, had heard Lechner howl. It was a horrible sound, the worst sound he'd ever heard a human being make. Lechner's wound looked terrible. The upper part of his right leg was normal, but the bottom half flopped grotesquely to one side. He was turning white. Goodale felt sickened as he saw a widening pool form under the leg. Blood flowed from Lechner's wound as if from a jug.

In the doorway, Steele was motioning to his men across the street for them to join him in the courtyard. He was still trying to assemble everybody in one place.

But even after those few men were safely inside, the captain had no idea where the rest of the Rangers and D-boys had gone. And he had a courtyard full of wounded men to worry about.

A block away, several groups of Rangers and Commando soldiers had linked up at the crash site. They were pinned down under an intense barrage of small-arms and RPG fire. Most of them had taken cover along a wide street that formed an ``L'' at the intersection of the crash site. At the helicopter itself, the search-and-rescue team was collecting wounded and trying to extricate the body of pilot Cliff Wolcott from the wreckage.

ONE OF THE Commando team leaders, Sgt. Paul Howe, realized he had to get the men off the street and out of the line of fire. He and another soldier slammed their shoulders into the gate of a narrow courtyard between two houses and burst inside, weapons ready. They found a terrified family - a man, his wife and several children cowering in a room.

Howe stood in the doorway, pointing his weapon with his right hand and trying to coax the people out of the room with his left. It took awhile, but they came out slowly, clinging to one another. Howe searched them, and handed them back to his team to be handcuffed and herded into a side room.

When the rooms adjacent to the courtyard had been cleared, Howe waved in Commando ground commander, Capt. Scott Miller and the rest of the men on the street. Miller, who had finally caught up with Howe in his run to the crash site, knew from radio traffic that the ground convoy was hopelessly lost and badly mauled. He welcomed the cleared courtyard as a command post and casualty collection point. They might be stuck there all night.

As the men piled in, a sergeant major ordered Howe to go outside and help the Rangers still on the street. The directive angered Howe. It was the order of a soldier who didn't know what to do next. Howe felt much more aggressive steps should be taken. He believed they should be looking for ways to strongpoint their position, expand their perimeter, identify other buildings to take over to give them better lines of fire. Instead he was being asked to just help hold the fort.

He didn't mask his disgust. He began gathering up ammunition, grenades and antitank weapons from the wounded Rangers in the courtyard. He stomped angrily out on the street and began looking for Somalis to shoot.

He found one of the Rangers, Spec. Shawn Nelson, firing a handgun at the window of the house Howe had just cleared. Nelson had seen someone moving in the window.

``What are you doing?" Howe shouted across the alley.

Nelson couldn't hear Howe. He shouted back, ``I saw someone in there."

``No s-. There are friendlies in there!"

When Nelson found out later that he had fired on his own men, he was mortified. No one had told him that Commando had moved into that space, but, then again, it was a cardinal sin to shoot before identifying a target.

Already furious, Howe now began venting at the Rangers, who he felt were hunkered down in defensive positions waiting for guidance.

They weren't shooting as much as Howe felt they should be. They did not seem to appreciate just how desperate their situation had become. Cut off and surrounded, their survival was at stake.

Howe watched several Rangers try to hit a Somali who kept darting out, shooting, and then retreating behind a shed about a block away. The big Commando sergeant picked up a LAW - a light antitank weapon - and hurled it across the road. It landed on Spec. Lance Twombly, who was on his belly, bruising his forearm. He turned angrily.

``Shoot the motherf-er!" Howe screamed.

Howe looked for a protected spot where he could fire. He found a sort of pocket of invisibility. There was nothing to protect him from fire, but the tree across the street at Nelson's position and the slope of the hill behind him provided excellent, though not obvious, concealment. From there he was able to stand a yard or two away from the wall on the west side and cover the road north. He fired methodically, saving his ammunition, cursing viciously as he shot, still incensed by what he regarded as the Rangers' hesitancy.

Even his ammunition angered him. Howe was firing the Army's new 5.56mm green tip round. It had a tungsten carbide penetrator at the tip that could punch holes in metal. But that penetrating power meant his rounds were passing right through his targets. The rounds made small, clean holes in the Somalian gunmen, and unless they hit the head or spine the men didn't go down. Howe felt that he had to hit each man five or six times just to get his attention.

Across the street, First Lt. Larry Perino and Cpl. Jamie Smith crept along a wall next to a tin shed. Howe watched as Smith and another Ranger moved out away from the wall to shoot up the street. It looked to him as though they were trying to emulate the position he had found, but there was no tree on their side to offer concealment. He shouted across at them impatiently, but in the din he wasn't heard.

They were taking so much fire, it was confusing. Rounds seemed to be coming at them from all directions. Concrete chips fell from the wall over Perino's head and rattled down. He spotted a Somalian muzzle flash and was just about to run out and tap Smith on the shoulder and gesture for him to try to hit the Somali with his grenade launcher when a spray of bullets ripped through the shed.

Then Smith was hit. Nelson, watching from across the street, saw him

go down. He actually heard the smack of the round that hit him, like a hard slap. Smith dropped to one knee and then, almost as an afterthought, as if he were commenting about someone else, remarked, ``I'm hit!''

Perino helped move him against the wall. Now Smith was screaming, ``I'm hit! I'm hit!''

Up the street, other men were shouting in pain. Staff Sgt. Ken Boorn was hit in the foot. Pfc. Carlos Rodriguez rolled away from his machine gun, bleeding and clutching his crotch. Eight of 13 men in Lt. Perino's Chalk One had now been wounded.

The lieutenant and a medic pulled Smith into the courtyard, where the medic tore open Smith's pants leg. Smith told Perino, ``Man, this really hurts.''

Smith had been shot in the upper thigh. The medic stuck an IV in him and started shoving Curlex, a pressure dressing, directly up into the wound. Perino didn't know if the medic had made a bigger incision to get up inside Smith or if the round had caused it, but there was a gaping hole in his upper leg and blood was everywhere.

Perino radioed Capt. Steele:

``We can't go any further, sir. We have more wounded than I can carry.''

``You've got to push on,'' Steele told him. He wanted everyone together at the crash site.

``We CANNOT go further. Request permission to occupy a building.''

Steele told Perino again to keep trying.

Perino didn't know it, but the courtyard where he stood was just 50 feet from First Lt. Tom DiTomasso's men from Chalk Two, who had joined the search-and-rescue team at the crash site. They had taken cover in a stone house across an alley from the downed Blackhawk.

Perino tried to reach DiTomasso on his radio.

Tom, where are you?

DiTomasso tried to explain his position.

I can't see. I'm in a courtyard, Perino said.

DiTomasso popped a red smoke bomb, and Perino could see the smoke drifting up in the darkening sky. It was nearly 5 p.m., about 90 minutes into the mission.

Steele's voice on the radio kept pushing Perino to link up with DiTomasso: They need your help.

Perino said: Look, sir, I've got three guys left, counting myself. How can I help him?

Finally, Steele relented: Roger, strongpoint the building and defend it.

In the courtyard, the medic had his hand up inside Smith's leg. Smith looked pale and distant. The medic had started a morphine drip. ``It looks like it's got his femoral artery," he said.

He was distressed but focused. ``It's too high for a tourniquet, and I can't put a clamp on it, and I can't put a hemostat on it. All I can do is put direct pressure on it."

Perino radioed Steele again.

Sir, we need a Medivac. A Little Bird or something. For Corporal Smith. We need to extract him now."

Steele relayed the request on the command net. It was tough to break through. With Mike Durant's helicopter now shot down and the ground convoy laden with dead and wounded soldiers, every call on the radio was shouted and urgent.

Finally Steele got through. The answer came back from Command: There would be no relief for some time, and putting another helicopter down in their hot neighborhood was out of the question.

The captain radioed Perino back and told him that, for the time being, they would just have to hang on.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 23

As darkness nears, a dreaded feeling

December 8, 1997

THE COMPANY CLERK, Spec. John Stebbins, ran into the street to get Pfc. Carlos Rodriguez, who had been shot in the groin and was howling in pain. Stebbins tried to drag him by his body armor, but Rodriguez was a tall, solid kid, and short, stubby Stebbins couldn't pull him.

Rodriguez had both hands over his crotch, and blood was pumping out from between his fingers and flowing from his mouth. Stebbins reached around Rodriguez's waist and half-carried, half-dragged him off the street. Rodriguez's head dragged in the dirt.

One of the commando commandos ran over and helped haul Rodriguez into the courtyard of a house, where he was added to a rapidly expanding group of wounded men. A makeshift command post had been set up inside the house, which stood roughly a block from the wreck of pilot Cliff Wolcott's Blackhawk.

Now, nearly three hours into the mission, the men feared they would be stuck at the house all night, cut off from other soldiers also pinned down at various locations near the wreck. Mission commanders had already radioed that it was too dangerous to try to land a helicopter and evacuate the wounded.

It was dusk now, and the men gave up on the ground convoy that was supposed to meet them at the crash site. They knew the convoy was lost and badly mauled. They had seen the vehicles drive past just a few blocks west about an hour earlier.

Everyone dreaded the approaching darkness. They were without their main technological advantage - their NODs (night optical devices), which allowed them to see in the darkness. The men had left them behind, assuming the midday mission would only take an hour. Most of them had left without their canteens, too, thinking they could do without water for an hour.

Now the force faced the night thirsty, tired, bleeding, running low on ammunition, and literally in the dark.

Sgt. TIM WILKINSON was inside the wrecked Blackhawk, tending to the wounded, when he got a radio call. The men holed up in the building across the street desperately needed another medic. Rodriguez was in terrible shape.

Wilkinson, who had roped down to the crash as part of a 15-man

combat search-and-rescue team, gathered up his medical kit. Then he turned to his wounded fellow medic, Master Sgt. Scott Fales, and deadpanned an absurdly cinematic request.

``Cover me,'' he said. Wilkinson was the team comic.

Head down, legs pumping, he ran and ran, plowing across the wide road, bullets snapping all around him. He burst into the courtyard and saw two of the big commando sergeants wrestling with Rodriguez, trying to get the terrified private under control.

Wilkinson cut open Rodriguez's uniform and saw that a round had ripped through his buttock and bored straight into his pelvis, blowing off one testicle as it exited his upper thigh. Into the gaping wound Wilkinson stuffed wads of Curlex, loosely rolled gauze that expands as it soaks up blood. He slipped pneumatic pants over Rodriguez's legs and pumped them with air to apply more pressure to the wound. The bleeding stopped.

He started an IV, then realized he was almost out of fluids. Fales had extra fluids at the crash site, but that meant another foray through the gunfire. Crouching and running at the same time, Wilkinson took off across the road again. He made it safely, and loaded up bags of fluids. With the bags cradled in his arms, he made yet another panicked dash across the road, the rounds screaming over his head. He arrived in the courtyard unscathed.

Wilkinson moved Rodriguez and the other wounded into a rear room. Then he turned to Capt. Scott Miller, the commando ground commander.

``Look, I've got a critical here,'' he said. ``He needs to get out right now. The others can wait, but he needs to come out.''

Miller didn't respond. He just gave the medic a look that said, We're in a bad spot here, what can I say?

WHEN THE SUN had slipped behind the buildings to the west, Stebbins was finally able to get a good look at the Somalis who had been firing at him from windows and doorways. He squeezed off rounds carefully, trying to conserve ammunition. His buddy, Pfc. Brian Heard, tapped him on the shoulder and shouted, ``Steb, I just want you to know in case we don't get out of this, I think you're doing a great job.''

Stebbins was trying to figure out whether Heard was serious or just goofing when the ground around them shook. Heavy rounds were shattering the wall behind them, taking down their cover.

Three more ear-shattering rounds hit the wall, and Stebbins was knocked backward. It was as if someone had yanked him from behind with a rope. He felt no pain, just a shortness of breath. He was dazed and covered with white powder from the pulverized mortar of the wall.

``You OK, Stebby? You OK?" Heard asked.

``I'm fine, Brian. Good to go."

Stebbins stood up, infuriated, cursing at full throttle as he stepped back out into the alley and resumed firing at a window down the street. Four other Rangers joined in, shooting at the same window. There came a whoosh and a crackling explosion, and Stebbins and Heard screamed and disappeared in a ball of flame.

Stebbins woke up flat on his back this time. He gasped for air and tasted dust and smoke. Up through the swirl he saw darkening blue sky and two clouds. Then Heard's face came swimming into view.

``Stebby, you OK? You OK, Stebby?"

``Yup, Brian. I'm OK. Just let me lie here for a couple seconds."

As Stebbins gathered his thoughts, he heard a voice from behind him. One of the the boys was looking down at him from a window. His voice sounded cool, like a California beach bum's.

``Where's this guy shooting from, man?"

Stebbins pointed out the window.

``All right, we've got it covered. Keep your heads down."

From his window perch, the commando marksman let go a round from his M203 grenade launcher, dropping it right into the targeted window. There was an enormous blast. Stebbins figured the round had detonated some kind of ammo, because there was a flash throughout the first floor. Black smoke poured from the window.

The evening grew quiet. Stebbins saw lights flick on in the distance and was reminded that they were in the middle of a big city, and that

in some parts of it life was proceeding normally. There were fires burning somewhere back toward the Olympic Hotel, where they had roped in. It seemed like ages ago.

A voice shouted across the intersection that everyone was to retreat back to the building across from the crash site. One by one, the men on Stebbins' corner started sprinting across the intersection. The volume of fire had died down.

Stebbins heard a whistling sound, and he turned to see what looked like a rock hurtling straight at him. It was going to hit his head. He ducked and turned his helmet toward the missile, and he was engulfed in fire and light.

His eyes were closed, but he saw bright red when the grenade exploded. He felt searing flames. He smelled burned hair and dust and hot cordite, and he was tumbling, mixed up with Heard, until they both came to rest sitting upright and staring at each other.

``Are you OK?" Heard asked after a long moment.

``Yeah, but I don't have my weapon."

Stebbins started to crawl back to his position, looking for his weapon. He found it in pieces. There was a barrel but no hand grip. He could feel dust up his nose and in his eyes, and he could taste it. He tasted blood, too. He figured he'd just cut his lip.

He needed another weapon. He stood up and started running for the courtyard, figuring he'd grab a rifle from one of the wounded men. He kept falling down. His left leg and foot felt as if they were asleep. Some of the other men ran out and dragged him into the courtyard.

Stebbins was covered with dirt and dust, his pants burned off, his leg bleeding. Wilkinson helped him into the back room where the other wounded were gathered. It was already dark there, and Stebbins smelled blood and sweat and urine. There were three Somalis huddled on a couch; the the boys had handcuffed the man of the house and sat him down with his wife and child. Rodriguez was in the corner, moaning and taking short, loud, sucking breaths.

The Somalis moved to the floor, and Wilkinson eased Stebbins down on the couch and started cutting off his left boot with a big pair of shears.

``Hey, not my boots!" he complained. ``What are you doing that for?"

Wilkinson slid the boot off smoothly and slowly and removed the sock. Stebbins was shocked to see a golf ball-sized chunk of metal lodged in his foot. He realized for the first time that he'd been hit. He had noticed that his trousers looked blackened, and now, illuminated by the medic's white light, he saw that the blackened flaking patches along his leg were skin. He felt no pain, just numbness. The fire from the explosion had cauterized his wounds.

One of the boys poked his head in the door and gestured toward the white light.

``Hey, man, you've got to turn that white light out,'' he said. ``It's dark out there now, and we've got to be tactful.''

Stebbins was amused by that word: Tactful. But then he thought about it - tactful, tact, tactics - and it made perfect sense.

Wilkinson turned off the white light and flicked on a red flashlight.

``You're out of action,'' he said. ``Listen, you're numb now, but it's going to go away. All I can give you is some Percocet.''

Wilkinson handed Stebbins a tablet and some iodized water in a cup. Wilkinson then handed him a rifle. ``You can guard this window,'' he told him.

``OK.''

``But as your health-care professional,'' Wilkinson added, ``I feel I should warn you that narcotics and firearms don't mix.''

Stebbins just shook his head and smiled.

Finally he was left to sit there alone on the couch, clutching his rifle, listening to Rodriguez moaning and sucking air and to the Somalian woman complaining with words he didn't understand that her husband's handcuffs were too tight. Stebbins realized he had to urinate badly. There was no place to go. So he just released the flow where he sat.

He caught the woman's eye.

``Sorry about the couch,'' he said.

Disarray in command, and trapped

December 9, 1997

AS DARKNESS FELL, tensions continued to build between the Commando and Ranger commanders. Over the radio, they argued over where to best position the 99 men now scattered through the narrow streets around pilot Cliff Wolcott's downed Blackhawk.

Capt. Scott Miller, the Commando ground commander, wanted Capt. Mike Steele, the Ranger commander, to take the nearly two dozen men holed up with him and move a block north to where Miller had taken cover with his men. Steele was reluctant.

Lt. Col. Gary Harrell, the mission commander, radioed from his Blackhawk helicopter circling high over the city. He agreed with Miller that everyone should be gathered in one place near the crash site to form more effective crossfire zones and give helicopter gunships a better shot at the Somalian gunmen surrounding them. The Little Birds were making dazzling gun runs, raining brass links from the miniguns on their heads.

I know it's tough, said Harrell, and you're doing the best you can, but try to get everyone at one site and have one guy talking down there if you can.

Steele responded: OK. Hoo-ah.

He told a sergeant, Sean Watson, to get ready to move out. Watson immediately confronted his captain. Many enlisted men would lack the confidence to challenge their commanding officer, especially in battle, but Watson was a highly respected sergeant first class. He spoke bluntly.

``Hey, sir, uh-uh,'' he said. ``No way.''

Watson said he thought the idea was foolhardy. They could expect a hail of bullets and grenades the second they stepped out the door. They had five wounded men, two of whom would have to be carried. The body of Commando Sgt. First Class Earl Fillmore, who had been shot in the head, would also have to be hauled. Four men would have to carry each litter, making convenient cluster targets. Watson pointed out that it would take a lot to overrun their well-defended courtyard.

The Rangers listened nervously. To a man, they sided with Watson. They thought moving only invited more trouble when they had plenty already. Steele took a deep breath and reconsidered.

``I think you're right," he told Watson.

Steele conferred briefly with the D-boys in the courtyard, then relayed word to Miller:

Right now we're not going to be able to move, not with all these wounded.

Miller was perturbed. Technically, as he understood it, even though he and Steele were both captains, his D-boys were in charge on the ground. He wanted Steele and his men to move.

Steele did not consider Miller his superior officer. He relayed word to Miller, no, and suggested the question be settled by Col. Harrell. If Harrell said move, they'd move.

Harrell refused to decide the issue. He told both captains:

If you stay separated, I cannot support you as well. You're the guy on the ground, and you have to make the call.

Steele had made his call. He was not going to waste time arguing about it. He ignored Sgt. John Boswell when the Commando soldier offered him his headset and urged him to discuss the matter further with Miller.

Miller then made his own call. He ordered the Commando soldiers pinned down with Steele's men to move up and join him, leaving the Rangers behind. Steele was bitter, but he didn't try to stop them.

He watched as the D-boys lined up in the courtyard, preparing to make their dash out the door. Then the first group of four went charging out into the night. Gunfire exploded the instant they passed through the door. The whole neighborhood erupted. Within seconds, all four o fthe boys came flying back into the courtyard, tripping over the same metal doorway rim that had tripped up Steele earlier. They wound up in a heap on the ground, their gun barrels clinking together as they untangled.

Steele watched with mild amusement and satisfaction. Nobody was going anywhere.

Inside the stone house adjacent to the crash site, the men blew a hole in one of the walls and began moving the wounded and dead into the adjacent space. Through the new hole a Somalian woman in a flowing orange robe stepped in screaming words the men couldn't understand. When she stepped out, gunfire ripped through windows and openings. Then the woman came back, screamed more, and left. Again came the rain of gunfire.

``If that bitch comes back, I'm going to kill her,'' one of the D-boys grumbled.

She did, and he did.

Sgt. First Class Al Lamb helped moved CWO Donovan ``Bull'' Briley's body into the newly opened space. Briley had died in the crash of Wolcott's helicopter. When Lamb set Briley down, the copilot's head hit the wall with a mushy thud that sickened Lamb. He flattened him out so that when rigor mortis set in the body would not be folded at the waist. Lamb remembered seeing Briley the day before, running, wearing spandex shorts, a powerful man. He thought, Jesus, this is a sad day.

IN A COURTYARD less than 50 yards away, First Lt. Larry Perino, medic Kurt Schmid and others were taking turns sticking their fingers up inside Cpl. Jamie Smith's wound, trying to keep the severed femoral artery pinched shut. Smith had been in awful pain from a gunshot wound to his upper thigh, but a morphine drip had quieted him. He was still conscious, but barely. He looked pale and distant. Schmid kept telling Perino: ``We need help. He's not going to make it.''

Earlier in the evening, a Blackhawk had dropped fresh supplies of fluids and medicine, along with more ammunition. But Smith needed a doctor and a hospital.

Perino radioed down the block to Steele: Hey, Captain, we've got to get Smith out. He's getting worse.

Steele knew this was doubtful, but radioed Harrell and urged him to put a helicopter down in the wide intersection outside his doorway. Harrell was not encouraging. He said the resupply helicopter had been badly shot up and had barely made it out - and it had only hovered, not landed.

Even so, Steele could hear Harrell pleading with his superiors at the Joint Operations Center at the airport base. Harrell stressed that both

Smith and Pfc. Carlos Rodriguez, who had been shot in the groin, were in critical condition. He asked about the quick reaction force, which was still being assembled at the base to drive into the city and smash through to the surrounded soldiers.

Harrell was insistent:

If the QRF [quick reaction force] does not get there soon, there will be more KIAs [killed in action] from previously received WIAs [wounded in action].

But to no avail. Rescue convoys had failed. The other helicopter crash site, Mike Durant's Blackhawk, had been overrun. The forces of warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, fully mobilized, had dug trenches and erected burning barricades on all roads leading to Wolcott's crash site.

Word came back from Command that they were not going to try to land a helicopter but instead would wait on the armored convoy. They needed at least another hour.

Harrell reluctantly delivered the verdict to Steele:

We are going to have to hold on the best we can with those casualties and hope the ground reaction force gets there on time.

Steele sadly passed the word to Perino: It's just too hot.

Perino took the news badly. It was one thing to weigh these matters rationally, but quite another to have a young man's blood splashed all over your hands and arms, to have your fingers up inside his wound, feeling his life ebbing away.

They had pushed as much fluid from the resupply into Smith as they could, but he needed blood.

Perino could tell that even though Smith had become weak and silent, he was still alert enough to be very scared. His father, James Sr., had been a Ranger in Vietnam and had lost a leg in battle. He had tried, before Jamie enlisted, to instill a respectful fear of combat into his son, describing in graphic detail the horrors he had seen in Vietnam.

Jamie had grown up wanting to be nothing but a Ranger. As a boy, he had sometimes worn his father's old Army jacket to school in Long Valley, N.J. His younger brother, Matt, was planning to enlist and enter Ranger school.

Three years earlier, when he was still in basic training, Jamie had written to his father: ``Today while walking back from lunch I saw two Rangers walking through the company area. It's the dream of being one of those guys in faded fatigues and a black beret that keeps me going."

Now the life was flowing from him. There was nothing more Perino and Schmid could do.

Not long after the refusal of the helicopter, Perino radioed Steele: Don't worry about the Medivac, sir. It's too late.

The news was broadcast over the command net: One of the critical WIAs has just been KIA.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 25

Confusion as rescue convoy rolls out

December 10, 1997

LT. COL. BILL DAVID knew very well the consequences of delay. There were wounded Rangers out in the city who were going to die unless the rescue convoy got there soon.

But David, ground commander of the 10th Mountain Division's Quick Reaction Force, was coping with overwhelming complications trying to put the multinational convoy together. It was late in the evening now, more than five hours into the battle.

David and the rest of Charlie Company, about 150 men on a convoy of nine flatbed trucks and a dozen humvees, had already tried to fight their way out to the city once. Before sunset they had made a bid to reach the southern crash site, where pilot Mike Durant and his crew were about to be overrun by Somalis. The convoy had made it only to K-4 Circle, more than a mile from the crash site, before being turned back by a blistering ambush.

Now he had been ordered to hastily assemble a massive rescue force from four Pakistani tanks, 28 Malaysian armored personnel carriers (APCs), his own men along with 150 men in the 10th's Alpha

Company, a platoon of eager Ranger volunteers along with the boys, and the still-ambulatory remnants of the lost convoy.

There was a chaotic scene at the New Port facility in Mogadishu, a few miles up the coast from Task Force Ranger's base. The Rangers and the boys were in a desperate hurry to get going, and they didn't hide their frustration. But assembling this patchwork convoy presented a host of problems.

It meant looking for drivers who could manage the five-ton trucks while wearing Night Optical Devices (NODs). Company armorer Spec. Peter Squeglia had some experience riding a motorcycle wearing NODs, so one of the lieutenants asked him to drive a truck.

``Sir, if you're telling me to drive it, I'll drive it. But I've never driven a truck before,'' Squeglia said.

He was terrified by the thought of grinding gears in the middle of a convoy, where one stalled vehicle could hold up an entire force or, worse, get left behind.

The lieutenant made a face, and walked off to find someone else. Squeglia felt deflated and guilty. Everybody was scared. Some guys were racing to the front of the column while others were looking for a way to avoid going out. Squeglia was somewhere in the middle. After what he had seen of the lost convoy, part of him felt that going out into that city was committing suicide. But they had to do it. He thought about his parents at home on a Sunday morning, reading the newspaper, without the slightest idea that, at this very moment, he was probably living the last minutes of his life.

He made sure he got into the truck after most of the others. He had decided that the safest place was toward the rear, where the spare tire and muffler came up. He wedged himself behind that.

Most of the Malaysian and Pakistani commanders spoke English, but their men did not, so decisions took longer to implement. Soldiers gathered around and held up flashlights to illuminate David's map. The West Point graduate had the delicate task of explaining to the Malaysians that their vehicles were needed but their men were not. David wanted to load his own better-trained soldiers onto the APCs, place the tanks in front of the column, move out midway between the two crash sites, and then send one company to each site.

WITH ALL THE DELAYS, it was 11:20 p.m. before they were ready to pull out of the gate. The Pakistani leader sprinted to David's humvee. He said they had been ordered not to lead the convoy. So David worked out a compromise. The tanks would escort for the first few miles, through any ambushes or roadblocks, then pull back and let Alpha Company pull out front in the APCs.

The formation moved out as planned. As it got close to the Black Sea neighborhood, the stronghold of warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, the Somalis unleashed vicious ambushes.

Phil Lepre, 24, a specialist from Philadelphia, was inside one APC with about nine other men from the 10th. There was only a little night-light in the darkness, and they could not see out. They listened to the mounting storm of gunfire and explosions pinging off the sides of the vehicle. Lepre had joined the Army to serve his tour and collect his college money. Like many men in the 10th, he was not a career soldier, and certainly not battle-hungry like the Rangers - who, while admired, were considered a little bit crazy.

Lepre heard his APC enveloped by the storm and thought, Holy s-, what am I going into?

``Saddle up, men. Say a prayer," said the platoon sergeant.

Lepre said a silent prayer. He reached inside his helmet and pulled out a snapshot of his daughter, Brittany, who was about to turn 2. He kissed the picture and said: ``Babe, I hope you have a wonderful life."

They blazed through the ambushes, firing thousands of rounds in all directions. Rangers and the boys holed up at the first crash site could hear the two-mile-long convoy approaching from miles away. They saw the bright glow of its guns in the black sky over the city.

Spec. Aaron Ahlfinger, 19, was in the second APC with eight other American soldiers. A Malaysian was driving, with two countrymen up front and a Malaysian gunner in the turret. Ahlfinger had never been in a vehicle like this. No one inside could see anything; they didn't realize it when the driver took a wrong turn and they, with a line of vehicles behind them, went rolling off in the wrong direction.

Then something big hit. The dim light in the back went out. Ahlfinger sat in the darkness with the other men until the door of the APC swung open and a Malaysian soldier shouted for them to get out.

An RPG had hit the carrier in front of them. It was burning. They found they were stranded in a radio dead zone, unable to communicate with the main column. They got out and blew a hole in a wall and moved inside for shelter. Along the way Sgt. Cornell Houston was shot in the leg.

Stranded now, they found themselves in a horrific gunfight. Houston was shot again, in the chest by a sniper, a wound that he would die from a few days later in Germany. At one point, some in Ahlfinger's group realized that one of the wounded Malaysians was still stuck inside the smoldering APC.

Sgt. Hollis ordered Cpl. Richard Parent to send someone out to get the Malaysian. Parent commanded two men, both married with children. They looked at each other worriedly. Parent had to choose. He hesitated a moment, then took off himself, running for the APC through the gunfire, screaming at the top of his lungs. He dragged the man out of the vehicle and pulled him back to cover.

The convoy was so big that Capt. Drew Meyerowich, saw from a humvee further back in the column that the vehicles had made a wrong turn, but was unable to make radio contact. There was nothing he could do but hope they doubled back.

The convoy split into two companies. One headed west to the crash site of Durant's Super 64, overrun by Somalis hours earlier. The other pushed on north to the first crash site, Cliff Wolcott's Super 61, where 99 Rangers and the boys were pinned down and waiting.

The Malaysian driver leading the northbound platoon drew to a stop in front of a flimsy barricade. In the past, Somalis had mined such barricades, so plowing through could be dangerous. The Rangers and the boys cajoled and finally threatened, but the APC driver wouldn't budge.

So the soldiers piled out of the vehicles and began pulling the barricade apart by hand, under heavy fire. Spec. Lepre and several other men got out and ran for cover, then started firing. Lepre shot his M-16 over the heads of an approaching crowd. The Somalis kept coming, so he shot into them. He saw several people fall, and the crowd melted away, dragging the people he had hit.

For the next half hour, Lepre and his team were hunkered down, taking heavy fire from a nearby building. Lepre was behind a short wall, and he wanted to move a few yards away for a better vantage to

fire back.

``Private, get over here and take my position," he called back to 23-year-old rifleman James Martin.

Martin hustled up and crouched behind the wall. Lepre had moved only two steps away when Martin was hit in the head by a round that sent him sprawling backward. Lepre saw a small hole in his forehead.

``Medic! Get up here, medic!" he shouted.

A medic swooped over the downed man and began loosening his clothes, to help prevent shock. He worked on Martin for a few minutes, then turned, and told Lepre: ``He's dead."

The medic dragged Martin's body over to the wall, inadvertently tugging the dead man's pants down around his knees. Few of the guys wore underwear in tropical Mogadishu. Lepre felt terrible, and somehow responsible. He couldn't bear seeing Martin lying out with his trousers pulled down like that.

Despite the gunfire, he ran out and tried to pull Martin's pants back up and give the man some dignity. Two bullets struck the pavement next to where he stopped, and Lepre scrambled back for cover.

He was pinned there for a long time, gazing out on Martin's half-naked body. He wondered what it felt like to get shot in the head and killed. He pinched himself a couple of times, hard. Would it feel like that? He felt terrible.

``Sorry, man," he said to Martin.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 26

At rescue, relief tinged with sorrow

December 11, 1997

CAPT. MIKE STEELE KNEW this was the most dangerous time of the night. The moon was high and the shooting had all but stopped. He and his men had been pinned down for more than nine hours.

There were a few pops, but otherwise the air had cleared of smoke and gunpowder. Now there was just that musky stench of Somalia, the trace of desert dust in the air, and the bitter aftertaste of the iodine pills the soldiers had dissolved in the local water to purify it.

Somalis would still inexplicably wander into the perimeter around Cliff Wolcott's wrecked helicopter. The Commando soldiers would let them stroll and then drop them with a few quick shots. From time to time, the Little Birds would rumble in and unleash rockets and minigun fire. But the only noise that concerned Steele was the intensifying thunder of guns as the rescue column moved closer.

With that much shooting, with two jumpy elements of soldiers about to link up in darkness in a confusing city, the biggest threat to his pinned-down men was their rescuers.

By the sound of it, the convoy troops were coming fast now, and shooting at everything. Word came from the command helicopter shortly before 2 a.m.

OK, start getting ready to get out of there, but keep your heads down. Now is a bad time.

Steele answered: Roger, copy. Positions are marked at this time. We are ready to move.

Roger, they are going to be coming in with heavy contact so be real careful.

You better believe it, over.

Steele radioed First Lt. Larry Perino, who was in a house a block north: ``I want everybody to back up out of the courtyards, and to stay away from the doors and windows."

The Rangers drew back like hermit crabs into their shells, and listened. They were all terrified of the 10th Mountain Division, regarded by many Rangers as poorly trained regular-Army schmoes, just a small step removed from utterly incompetent civilianhood.

Five minutes passed, 10 minutes, 20 minutes.

Perino called Capt. Steele: ``Where are they?"

``Any minute now," Steele said, for the umpteenth time that night. Both men laughed.

When Steele heard vehicles making the turn onto Freedom Road, his men saw the dim outline of soldiers. Everyone called out, ``Ranger! Ranger!"

``Tenth Mountain Division," came the response.

Steele stuck his head out the door.

``This is Capt. Steele. I'm the Ranger commander."

``Roger, sir, we're from the 10th Mountain Division," a soldier answered.

``Where's your commander?" Steele asked.

IT TOOK HOURS to pry pilot Cliff Wolcott's body from the wreck. It was ugly work. The rescue column had brought along a quickie saw to cut the metal frame of the cockpit away from Wolcott's body, but the cockpit was lined with a layer of Kevlar that just ate up the saw blade. Next the soldiers tried to pull the copter apart, attaching chains to the front and back. Some of the Rangers, watching from a distance, thought the D-boys were using the vehicles to tear Wolcott's body out. They turned away.

The dead were laid out on top of the armored personnel carriers, and the wounded were loaded inside. Sgt. Mike Goodale, who had been shot in the thigh and had a big exit wound on his buttock, hobbled painfully and was helped through the doors of an APC.

``We need you to sit," he was told.

``Look, I got shot in the ass. It hurts to sit."

``Then lean or something."

Down the street at Commando Capt.Scott Miller's courtyard, they carried wounded Pfc. Carlos Rodriguez out first. Then they loaded the rest of the men.

As the hours stretched on, the wounded men grew restless in the windowless chambers of the APCs. They couldn't see what was going on, and they didn't understand the protracted delay.

Painted white, parked in the center of the road, the APCs might as well have been giant bull's-eyes. Goodale had only a small peek hole

to see outside. It was so warm he started feeling woozy. He took off his helmet and loosened his body armor. They all sat in the small dark space just staring silently at one another, waiting.

``You know what we should do," suggested one of the wounded D-boys. ``We should kind of crack one of these doors a little bit so that if an RPG comes in here, we'll all have someplace to explode out of."

There was bitter laughter.

Goodale leaned up toward the Malaysian driver.

``Hey, let's go," he said.

``No. No. We stay," said the driver.

``Goddamnit, we're not staying! Let's get the f- out of here!"

``No. No. We stay."

``No, you don't understand this. We're getting shot at. We're going to get f-d up in this thing!"

There were about 200 Americans now in and around these two blocks of Mogadishu, the vanguard of a convoy that stretched a half mile. There was joy and relief for the 99 men who had been pinned down overnight, but also pain. Sgt. First Class Paul Howe, one of the Commando team leaders, glanced up at the top of a vehicle and saw the soles of two small assault boots. There was only one guy in the unit with boots that small. It had to be Earl Fillmore, his D-boy buddy who had been shot in the head hours earlier.

When Cliff Wolcott's body was at last freed from the wreckage, the exhausted remnants of Task Force Ranger who could still walk learned, to their dismay, that there wasn't room enough on the vehicles for them to ride out of the city. They would have to run a half-mile back out to National Boulevard.

Shot at all along the way, they covered the ground the same way they had come in, running, leapfrogging intersections, returning fire down alleyways. Remarkably, only one Ranger, Sgt. Randy Ramaglia, was badly injured. He was loaded onto a vehicle and driven the rest of the way to the soccer stadium that served as the Pakistani headquarters, where a field hospital had been set up.

At the stadium, the soccer pitch was covered with wounded men. Many unhurt men walked among the litters with tears in their eyes or with thousand-mile stares. Helicopters with red crosses painted on the sides came and went, shuttling the wounded back to the main hospital by the hangar.

Pvt. Ed Kallman, who earlier had so thrilled at the chance to be in combat, now watched with horror as medics efficiently sorted the litters as they came off vehicles.

``Dead in that group there. Live in this group here."

The medics and doctors cut off the bloody, dirty clothes, exposing awful wounds, guys with gaping, bruised holes in their bodies, limbs mangled, poor Carlos Rodriguez with a bullet through his scrotum, Goodale with his bare wounded butt up in the air, Spec. John Stebbins riddled with shrapnel, Lt. James Lechner with his leg ripped open, Ramaglia . . . the list went on and on.

Spec. Steve Anderson recoiled. When the APC pulled in with Donovan Briley's body on top, he had to turn away. Briley had died in the crash of Super 61. His body was discolored. It looked yellow-orange, and through the deep gash in his head he could see brain matter spilled down the side of the carrier. When the medics asked for help getting the body down, Anderson ducked away. He couldn't deal with it. Pvt. Terry Butler volunteered. Anderson couldn't help watching as they slid the body off. Blood poured out of Briley's head and down the white side of the carrier.

Goodale was laid out in the middle of the big stadium looking up at a clear blue sky with his pants cut off. A 10th Mountain medic leaned over and dropped ash from his cigarette as he tried to stick an IV needle into Goodale's arm. Even though it was sunny and at least 90 degrees, the wounded Ranger was suddenly chilled to the bone. He started shaking. One of the doctors gave him some hot tea.

That's how Sgt. Raleigh Cash found him. Cash had come in on the rescue convoy and was wandering wild-eyed through the makeshift field hospital looking for his friends. At first sight, he thought Goodale was a goner. The half-naked sergeant was stone white and shaking.

Cash flagged a nurse, who covered Goodale with a blanket and tucked it around him. Goodale told Cash about the deaths of Spec. Jamie Smith and Sgt. Fillmore, and he went down the list of wounded. Cash told Goodale what he had seen back at the hangar when the lost

convoy came in. He told him about the deaths of Sgt. Lorenzo Ruiz, Spec. James Cavaco, Sgt. Casey Joyce and Pfc. Richard ``Alphabet'' Kowalewski.

Cash had seen Ruiz, badly wounded, not long before he died.

``You're going to be fine,'' he had told him.

``No. No I'm not,'' Ruiz had said. He had barely enough strength to form the words. ``I know it's over for me. Don't worry about me.''

Then they had taken him to the helicopter and flown him away. Word came back not long afterward that he'd died.

Stebbins was set down among a group of his buddies, naked from the waist down. A grenade explosion had shredded his fatigue pants. Sgt. Aaron Weaver brought him a hot cup of coffee.

``Bless you, my son,'' said Stebbins. ``Got any cigarettes?''

Weaver didn't. Stebbins began asking everyone who walked past. A Malaysian soldier gave him one, bent over to light it for him, and then gave Stebbins the pack.

Sgt. First Class Sean Watson found him.

``Stebby, I hear you did your job. Good work,'' he said. He reached down and took a two-inch flap of cloth from Stebbins' shredded trousers and tried to place it over his genitals. They both laughed.

The first person Spec. Dale Sizemore found from his Chalk was Staff Sgt. Chuck Elliott. They both burst into tears when they saw each other, glad to find each other alive. Then Sizemore started telling Elliott about the dead and wounded Rangers from the lost convoy. They sat and cried and talked, watching as the dead were loaded onto helicopters.

``There's Smitty,'' said Elliott.

``What?''

``That's Smith.''

Sizemore saw two feet hanging out from under a sheet. One was booted, the other bare. Elliott told him how he and others had taken turns for hours putting their fingers up inside Spec. Jamie Smith's pelvic wound, pinching the femoral artery. They had cut off the one

pants leg and boot. That's how he knew it was Smith.

Steele was badly shaken when he learned that more of his men were dead. Until reaching the stadium, Smith was the only fatality Steele had known about for certain. His staff sergeant had told him there were others, but he wasn't sure yet how many. Steele found a bottle of water and sat drinking it, alone with his thoughts, overwhelmed with grief but unwilling to show much emotion before his men.

Some of his men were in tears, others were chattering away as if they couldn't talk fast enough to get all their stories out. The captain found a place to sit at the edge of a mortar pit and laid his rifle across his lap and just breathed deeply and swished the cool water in his mouth and tried to review all that had happened. Had he made the right decisions? Had he done everything he could?

One by one the wounded were loaded up and flown back to the hospital and hangar.

Riding in the helicopter on the way back was very calming for Sizemore. The wind through the open doors and the view of city and sky and ocean felt safe and familiar. All of the men on the bird sat silently.

Spec. Shawn Nelson looked out over the blue ocean at a U.S. Navy ship in the distance. It was as if he were seeing things through someone else's eyes. Colors seemed brighter to him, smells more vivid. He felt the experience had changed him in some fundamental way. He wondered if other guys were feeling this, but it was so weird . . . he didn't know how to ask.

Steele felt strange looking down at the city where they had just fought. His whole world had been so tightly focused for so long on two blocks of Mogadishu. To suddenly lift up and see the whole city stretching under him, to see the beach and the ocean in morning sunlight, it was almost too much, a reminder of how small Mogadishu was in the larger scheme of things.

When Ramaglia was loaded onto a bird, a medic leaned over him and said: ``Man, I feel sorry for you all."

``You should feel sorry for them," Ramaglia said, `` 'cause we whipped ass."

The D-boys had gotten an early chopper lift back to the hangar. They were already at work, cleaning their weapons, checking their gear,

restocking ammo. They were ready to go right back out.

Capt. Steele finally got the accurate casualty list when he returned to the hangar. Sgt. First Class Glenn Harris was waiting for him at the door. He saluted.

``Rangers lead the way, sir."

``All the way," Steele said, returning the salute.

``Sir, here's what it looks like," Harris said, handing over a green sheet of paper.

Steele was aghast. One list of names ran the entire length of the page, and Harris had started a second column at the top. This one ran almost to the bottom. One-third of his company had either been killed or injured.

``Where are they?" Steele asked.

``Most are at the hospital, sir."

Steele stripped off his gear and walked across to the field hospital. The captain put a great store on maintaining at least a facade of emotional resilience, but the scene in the hospital nearly reduced him to tears. Guys were lying everywhere, on cots, on the floor. Some were still bandaged in the haphazard wraps given them during the fight. He choked out a few words of encouragement to each. Saying more would have tapped the well of grief deep in his throat. The last soldier he saw was Cpl. Rob Phipps, the youngest of the Rangers on the search-and-rescue helicopter. Phipps looked as if he'd been beaten with a baseball bat. His face was swollen twice its normal size and was black and blue. His back and leg were heavily bandaged, and there were stains from his oozing wounds. Steele laid his hand on him.

``Phipps?"

The soldier stirred. When he opened his eyes, there was red where the whites normally were.

``You're going to be OK."

Phipps reached up and grabbed the captain's arm.

``Sir, I'll be OK in a couple of days. Don't go back out without me."

Steele nodded and fled the room.

The Rangers all wandered back into the hangar, amazed by the sudden emptiness of it. Many of the men talked, sharing stories, compiling an oral history of the previous 18 hours.

Spec. Shawn Nelson, who had helped his friend Casey Joyce into his flak vest the previous afternoon, now examined the bloody thing. It had a clean hole in the upper back. He rooted through the pockets. Guys sometimes stuffed pictures or love letters inside. In the front of Sgt. Joyce's vest he found the bullet. It must have passed right through his friend's body and been stopped by the plate in front. He put it in a tin can.

Sgt. Watson walked over to the morgue to see Smith one last time. He unzipped the body bag and gazed for a long time at his friend's pinched, pale, lifeless face. Then he leaned over and kissed his forehead.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 27

Durant's ordeal of agony and terror

December 12, 1997

MICHAEL DURANT heard birds singing and the voices of children at play. He had no idea where he was in Mogadishu, but the sounds and the sunlight beaming through holes in the concrete walls seemed at stark odds with everything that had happened hours before.

The injured, captive Blackhawk pilot was flat on his back on a cool tile floor in a small octagonal room with no windows. Air, sunlight and sounds filtered in through crosses cut into the concrete of the walls. There was a dusty odor. He smelled of blood and powder and sweat. The room had no furniture and only one door, which was closed.

It was Monday, Oct. 4, the morning of a day Durant thought he would never see. He had not slept. The previous evening, he had been attacked and carried off by angry Somalis who had overrun his downed helicopter crew and two Commando sergeants who had fought to protect them. The others were all dead, but Durant did not

know this.

His right leg ached where the femur was broken, and he could feel the ooze of blood inside his pants where the bone had poked through his flesh in the manhandling he'd endured. It did not hurt that badly. He didn't know if that was good or bad. He was still alive, so clearly the severed bone had not punctured an artery. His back was what really bothered him. He figured he'd crushed a vertebra in the crash.

The Somalis had bound him with a metal dog chain. They had wrapped it around his hands, which were pulled together on his stomach. During the long night he had worked one hand free. He was sweating so that when he relaxed his hand it slid easily from the chain. It had given him his first sense of triumph. He had fought back in some small way. He could wipe the dirt from his nose and eyes and straighten his broken leg somewhat and get a little more comfortable. Then he wrapped his hand back into the chain so his captors wouldn't know.

The birdsong made him think he was in a garden, and that this strange room was some kind of garden house. The children's voices made him think of an orphanage. He knew there was one in northern Mogadishu.

Durant had passed out when he was carried off. He'd felt himself leaving his body, watching the scene from outside himself, and it had calmed him briefly. But the feeling hadn't lasted long. He'd been thrown roughly into the back of a flatbed truck with a rag tied around his head. He had been driven around for a while. The truck would go and then stop, go and then stop. He guessed it was about three hours after the crash when they'd brought him to this place, removed the rag, and bound him with the chain.

The pilot had no way of knowing, but he had been kidnapped from Yousuf Dahir Mo'Alim, the neighborhood militia leader who had spared him from the attacking crowd. Mo'Alim and his men had been trying to take Durant back to their village, where they intended to contact leaders of his clan, the Habr Gidr. Durant couldn't walk, so they were carrying him when they were intercepted by a Land Cruiser with a big gun mounted on the back. The men in the vehicle were freelance street fighters, bandits not aligned with any clan. They considered the injured pilot not a war prisoner to be traded for captured Habr Gidr leaders, but a hostage. They knew somebody would pay to get him back.

Mo'Alim's men were outnumbered and outgunned, so they reluctantly turned Durant over. This was the way things were in Mogadishu. Whoever had the bigger guns prevailed. If the Habr Gidr leader, Mohamed Farrah Aidid, wanted the pilot back, he would have to pay for him.

The kidnappers had placed Durant in this room, and chained him. During the long night the pilot heard the roaring guns of the giant rescue column blazing its way into the city. At one point he heard several armored personnel carriers roll right past outside. He heard shooting and thought he was about to be rescued, or killed. There was a furious gunfight outside.

He could hear the low, pounding sound of a Mark 19 and the explosions of what sounded like TOW missiles. He had never been on the receiving end of a barrage, and he was shaken by how powerful and frightening it was. The explosions came closer. The Somalis holding him grew more and more agitated. He heard them shouting, and several times they barged in to threaten him. One of the men spoke some English. He said, ``You kill Somalis. You die Somalia, Ranger.'' Durant couldn't understand the rest of their words, but he gathered they intended to shoot him before letting the approaching Americans take him back.

His captors were all young men. Their weapons were rusted and poorly maintained. He listened to the pitched fighting with terror and hope. Then the sounds marched on and faded away. He found himself, despite the danger, feeling abject at their departure. They had been so close!

Soon dawn came. Durant was still frightened and uncomfortable and very thirsty, but the sunlight and the birds and children calmed him. He felt safer than at any moment since the crowd had closed on him.

Then a gun barrel poked around the door. Durant caught the motion out of the corner of his eye and turned his head just as the barrel flamed and the room rang with the sound of a shot. He felt the impact on his left shoulder and his left leg. Eyeing his shoulder he saw the back end of a round protruding from his skin. It evidently had hit the floor first and had ricocheted into him without fully penetrating. A bit of shrapnel had entered his leg.

He slid his hand free of the chain and tried to wrench the bullet from

his shoulder. It was an automatic move, a reflex, but when his fingers touched the round they sizzled and he winced with pain. The bullet was still hot. It had burned his fingertips.

He thought, lesson learned: Wait until it cools off.

WORD SPREAD QUICKLY through the hangar back at the base early the next morning, Tuesday, Oct. 5. There was something on the TV, on CNN, they had to see. Something horrible.

The aching and tired Rangers and Commando soldiers, many bandaged and bruised, watched the screen with disgust and anger. The pictures showed jubilant Somalis bouncing on the rotor blades of Super 64, Durant's helicopter, and then showed a thing almost too wounding and terrible to watch.

They had bodies. Bodies of these men's brothers, crew members from the helicopter or Commando soldiers, it was hard to tell from the angles and distances of the camera shots. They were dragging a body through the street at the end of a rope, kicking and poking at the lifeless form. It was ugly and savage, and the men went back out to the hangar and cleaned their weapons and waited for orders that would send them back out.

Commando Sgt. Paul Howe was ready. If he was going back out, he was going to kill as many Somalis as he could. He'd had enough. No more rules of engagement, no more toeing some abstract moral line. He was going to cut a gruesome path through these people.

BASHIR HAJI YUSUF was disgusted and ashamed by what he saw. The bearded lawyer had come down to the Bakara Market after the shooting to witness and photograph the aftermath. Bodies had been pulled off the streets, but he saw dead donkeys on the road, bloated and stiff. A great deal of damage had been done to buildings around the crash site nearest the Olympic Hotel.

He was snapping pictures of the helicopter wreckage when he heard the sounds of an excited crowd and ran to it. The Somalis had a dead American soldier draped across a wheelbarrow.

Bashir stayed on the fringes of the angry crowd. He snapped a few pictures. Then the people took the body of the soldier from the wheelbarrow and began dragging it in the dirt. Women were

screaming curses, and the men were shouting and laughing.

The lawyer wanted to stop it. He wanted to step up to the men with the ropes and remind them that the Koran teaches respect for the dead. But he was afraid for himself so he stayed back. These people were wild with anger and revenge. It was a festival of blood. He followed the crowd for a few blocks, then slipped away and went home.

A contingent of Saudi Arabian soldiers in U.N. vehicles encountered the crowd pulling the dead American by the K-4 Circle. The crowd had grown quite large.

``What are you doing?" asked one of the Saudi soldiers, clearly shocked.

``We have Animal Howe," one of the young Somalian ringleaders said, referring to the hated American U.N. administrator, retired Adm. Jonathan Howe.

``This is an American soldier," one of the Saudis said. ``If he is dead, why are you doing this? Aren't you a human being?"

One of the Somalis pointed his rifle at the soldier. ``We will kill you, too," he said.

Some in the crowd began shouting at the Saudis: ``Leave here! Leave it alone! The people are angry. They might kill you."

``But why do you do this?" the soldier demanded. ``You can fight and the Americans can fight, but this man is dead. Why do you drag him?"

Angry men in the crowd again threatened the Saudis, who climbed back into their vehicles and left.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 28

On TV, Durant's battered face

December 13, 1997

IN THE FIRST DAY of captivity, still flat on his aching back on a tile

floor in a small octagonal room, his right leg broken, with a bullet wound now in his shoulder, Blackhawk pilot Mike Durant was asked by his captors to make a video.

``No," Durant said.

He was surprised they'd asked. If they wanted to make a video, they were going to anyway. But, since they asked, he said no. It was safer not to be in that position, speaking to the world from captivity.

It was Oct. 4, a Monday. America had awakened to a tragedy in Mogadishu. Eighteen dead soldiers. More than 70 wounded. Hundreds of Somalis dead. On the TV screen came horrible images of a dead American soldier being dragged through the city's dusty streets by angry crowds.

President Clinton was in a hotel room in San Francisco when he saw the pictures. He was horrified and angry, according to an account in Elizabeth Drew's book On the Edge. He wanted to know who had made the decision to undertake this mission. Why hadn't he been informed?

``How could this happen?" he demanded.

Stephanie Shughart, the wife of Commando soldier Randy Shughart, had received word at 10 the night before. One of the other Fort Bragg, N.C., wives had called with the first drop of bad news: ``One of the guys has been killed."

One of the guys.

She had talked on the phone with Randy on Friday night. As usual, he had said nothing about what was going on, just that it was hot, he was getting enough to eat, and he was getting a great tan. He told her he loved her. He was such a gentle, loving man. It seemed so odd how he made a living, that he was a warrior.

One of the guys.

At the hangar in Mogadishu, the men had watched the dead soldier being dragged through the streets. They crowded into the back room and watched it replay on the screen. No one said a word. Some of the men turned away. The pilots wanted to mow them down, just mow them all down, land, and recover the body. But the commanders said no. There was a big crowd around the body. It would be a massacre.

Sgt. First Class John Macejunas was getting ready to go back out. The blond Commando had gone out into the fight three or four times the day and night before. When the rescue convoy couldn't reach Durant's crash site, Macejunas had led a small squad to the site on foot, scouring the area for his friends. Now he was dressed as a civilian, a journalist. He was going back out into the city to look for his brothers, alive or dead. The Rangers who saw him were in awe of the man's courage and cool.

AT VOLUNTEER HOSPITAL, surgeon Abdi Mohamed Elmi was covered with blood and exhausted. The wounded had started coming in early the evening before. It was just a trickle at first, despite the great volume of gunfire. There were burning roadblocks throughout the city, and the American helicopters were buzzing low and shooting, and most people were afraid to venture out.

Before the fight started, the Volunteer Hospital was almost empty. It was located down near the Americans' base by the airport. After the trouble had started with the Americans, most Somalis were afraid to come there. By the end of this day, Oct. 4, all 500 beds in the hospital would be full, and at least 200 more wounded would be lined in the hallways. And Volunteer wasn't the biggest hospital in the city. The numbers were even greater at Digfer. Most of those with gut wounds would die. The delay in getting them to the hospital - many more would come today than came yesterday - allowed infections to set in that could no longer be successfully treated with what antibiotics the hospital could spare.

The three-bed operating theater at Volunteer had been full and busy all through the night. Elmi was part of a team of seven surgeons who worked straight through without a break. He had assisted in 18 major surgeries by sunrise, and the hallways outside were rapidly filling with more, dozens, hundreds more.

It was like some tidal wave of gore.

He finally walked out of the operating room at 8 a.m., and sat down to rest. The hospital was filled with the chilling screams and moans of broken people, dismembered, bleeding, dying in horrible pain. Doctors and nurses ran in the hallways, trying to keep up. Elmi sat on a bench smoking a cigarette quietly. A French relief worker who saw him sitting down approached him angrily.

``Why don't you help these people?" she shouted at him.

``I can't," he said.

She stormed away. He sat until his cigarette was finished. Then he stood and went back to work. He would not sleep for another 24 hours.

DURANT'S CAPTORS showed up with a camera crew that evening, Oct. 4. It had been a full day since he crashed and was carried off in an angry swarm of Somalis. He was hungry, thirsty and still terrified. His face was bloody and swollen from where a militiaman had smacked him in the face with the butt of a rifle.

There were about 10 young men in the crew. They set up lights, a lot of lights. Only one of the crew spoke to him. The man spoke fairly good English.

Durant had been trained to undergo trials such as this. The key was to offer as little information as possible, to be cagey, not confrontational. His interrogators were not very skillful. There was a code of conduct spelling out what he could say and what he couldn't say, and Durant was determined to abide by it.

Men had been questioning him on and off all day, trying to get him to tell them more about who he was and what his unit was trying to do in Somalia. When the camera was turned on, the interviewer began pressing him on the same points. The Somalis considered all the Americans with the task force to be Rangers. ``No. I'm not a Ranger," Durant told him. He was a pilot.

``You kill people innocent," the interviewer insisted.

``Innocent people being killed is not good," Durant said.

That was the best they got out of him. Those were the words people all over the world would be seeing on their TVs the next day. Durant's swollen, bloody face, with his dark hair sticking straight up, and a wild, frightened look in his eye, lifted off the videotape, would soon be in newspapers and on the covers of newsmagazines worldwide.

After the camera crew left, a doctor showed up. He was kind, and he

spoke English well. He told Durant he had been trained at the University of Southern California. He apologized for the limited supplies he had with him, just some aspirin, some antiseptic solution and some gauze. He used forceps and gauze and the solution to gently probe Durant's leg wound, where the broken femur poked through the skin, and he cleaned off the end of the bone and the tissue around it.

It was sharply painful, but the pilot was grateful. He knew enough about wounds to know that a femur infection was relatively common, even with simple fractures. His was compound, and he had been lying on a dirty floor all night and day.

When the doctor left, Durant was moved from the room where he had awakened that morning to the sounds of birds and children. He was loaded into the back of a car, and a blanket was placed over him. It was terribly painful. Two men got into the car and sat on him. His leg was moving all over the place. It had swelled badly, and the slightest move was torture.

They brought him to a little apartment and left him in the care of a tall, pot-bellied man with thick glasses, a man he would come to know well over the next 10 days. It was Abdullahi Hassan, a man they called ``Firimbi," the propaganda minister for clan leader Mohamed Farrah Aidid. Durant didn't know it, but the warlord had paid his ransom.

Black Hawk Down

Chapter 29

The final chapter:

Freeing a pilot, ending a mission

December 14, 1997

IT WAS ON THE SECOND NIGHT of his captivity in Mogadishu that Blackhawk pilot Michael Durant was brought to Abdullahi Hassan, the man known as "Firimbi."

Firimbi was a big man for a Somali, tall with long arms and big hands. He had a pot belly, and squinted through thick, black-framed glasses. He was warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid's "propaganda minister." Once Aidid's men had purchased Durant back from the bandits who had kidnapped him, Firimbi was put in charge of his safekeeping.

He was told, "If any harm comes to the pilot, the same shall be done to you."

Durant arrived at night, angry, frightened and in pain. In the drive through the city he had been under a blanket in the backseat. He had no idea where he was. The men who brought him carried him up steps and along a walkway and set him down in a room.

Firimbi greeted him, but the pilot didn't answer. Durant's wounds, a compound-fractured right leg and a wounded shoulder, had become swollen and infected. Firimbi helped wash him and bandage his wounds. He passed word along that Durant needed a doctor.

That night, Monday, Oct. 4, Durant heard American helicopters flying overhead, broadcasting haunting calls:

Mike Durant, we will not leave you.

Mike Durant, we are with you always.

Do not think we have left you, Mike.

FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR to Somalia Robert Oakley was at a party at the Syrian Embassy in Washington on Oct. 5 when he got a phone call from the White House. It was Anthony Lake, national security adviser to President Clinton.

"I need to talk to you first thing in the morning," Lake said.

"Why, Tony?" Oakley said. "I've been home for six months."

Oakley, a gaunt, plainspoken intellectual with a distinguished career in diplomacy, had been President George Bush's top civilian in Mogadishu during the humanitarian mission that had begun the previous December and eventually ended the famine. He had left in March along with 20,000 Marines.

Since his return, Oakley had watched with dismay the course of events in Mogadishu. Despite his long experience there, no one from the White House or State Department had consulted him.

"Can you come to breakfast tomorrow at 7:30?" Lake asked.

The White House was in trouble. The day after the Oct. 3, 1993, Battle of Mogadishu, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin and Secretary of State

Warren Christopher had been grilled by angry members of Congress. How had this happened? Why were American soldiers dying in far-off Somalia?

These were the same questions that Clinton was asking his aides. Until this raid, Clinton had been briefed on missions in advance. This one had been mounted so quickly he had not been informed. He complained bitterly to Lake. He felt he had been blindsided, and he was angry. He wanted answers to a broad range of questions from policy to military tactics.

At the breakfast table in the East Wing on Oct. 6 were Lake and his deputy, Samuel R. Berger, and U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Madeleine K. Albright. Then they walked with Oakley into the Oval Office, where they joined the President, the vice president, Christopher, Aspin, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and several advisers.

The meeting lasted six hours. The thrust of the discussion was: What do we do now? An American soldier's body had been dragged through the streets by jeering Somalis. Eighteen soldiers were dead and 73 wounded. Hundreds of Somalis were dead. Durant was being held captive. The public was outraged, and Congress was demanding withdrawal.

Staying in Mogadishu to pursue Aidid was out of the question, even though retired Adm. Jonathan Howe, head of the U.N. effort there, and Maj. Gen. William F. Garrison, commander of Task Force Ranger, thought Aidid had been struck a mortal blow, and that it wouldn't take much to finish the job. Intelligence reports were that Aidid supporters were fleeing the city, their arsenals of rocket-propelled grenades expended. Others were sending peace feelers, offering to dump Aidid. But it was clear that America had lost its stomach for anything further in Somalia.

The meeting ended with a decision: America was pulling out. Task Force Ranger, reinforced to make a show of military resolve, would stay on - but would make a dignified withdrawal by March 1994. All efforts to capture Aidid would be called off.

Oakley was dispatched to Mogadishu to deliver this message and to try to secure the release of Durant.

There would be no negotiating with Aidid. Oakley was instructed to deliver a stern message: The President of the United States wanted the pilot released. Now.

JIM SMITH, the father of Ranger Cpl. Jamie Smith, was in a meeting at a bank in Long Valley, N.J., on Monday, Oct. 4, when, oddly, his boss' wife walked into the conference room.

"I just got a call from Carol," she said. "Call home."

Obviously, his wife, Carol, had felt this was urgent. She had phoned the boss' home number, looking for a way to track him down.

"What's the matter?" he asked when Carol answered his return call.

Smith will always remember her next words.

"There are two officers here. Jamie has been killed. You have to come home."

When Jim got home, Carol told him: "Maybe they're wrong. Maybe Jamie is just missing."

But Smith knew. He had been a Ranger captain in Vietnam, and lost a leg in combat. He knew that in a tight unit such as his son's in Mogadishu, they wouldn't notify the family of death unless they had his son's body in hand.

"No," he told his wife quietly, trying to make the words sink in. "If they say he's dead, they know."

Camera crews began to arrive within hours. When everyone in his immediate family had been given the news, Smith walked out in the front yard to answer questions. He was repulsed by the attitude of the reporters and the kinds of questions they asked. How did he feel? How did they think he felt? He told them he was proud of his son and deeply saddened. Did he think his son had been properly trained and led? Yes, his son was superbly trained and led. Whom did he blame? The U.S. Army? Somalia? God?

Smith told them that he didn't know enough about what happened yet to blame anybody, that his son was a soldier, and that he died serving his country.

A Mailgram arrived two days later with a stark message signed by a colonel he didn't know. It resonated powerfully with Smith, even though he knew its contents before reading the words. It joined him in a sad ritual as old as war itself, with every parent who ever lost a son

in battle:

"THIS CONFIRMS PERSONAL NOTIFICATION MADE TO YOU BY A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY, THAT YOUR SON, SPC JAMES E. SMITH, DIED AT MOGADISHU, SOMALIA, ON OCTOBER 3, 1993. ANY QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO YOUR CASUALTY ASSISTANCE OFFICER. PLEASE ACCEPT MY DEEPEST SYMPATHY IN YOUR BEREAVEMENT."

STEPHANIE SHUGHART had finally received word about her husband, Randy Shugart, that Monday morning, Oct. 4, at Fort Bragg, N.C. She had called her boss to say she wouldn't be in for work - "a family emergency."

Her boss knew that Randy was in the Army, and she had heard the reports out of Mogadishu. She drove straight over to the Shugharts' house.

The two women drank coffee and watched CNN. Stephanie had been in an agony of suspense since the day before, when one of the other Commando wives had spread the word: "One of our guys has been killed." Stephanie and her boss were talking when two silhouettes appeared outside the door.

Stephanie opened it to two men from her husband's secret Commando unit. One was a close friend. This is it, she thought.He's dead.

"Randy is missing in action," her friend said.

She was determined not to despair. Randy would be fine. He was the most competent man alive. Her mental image of Somalia was of a jungle. She pictured her husband in some clearing, signaling for a chopper. When her friend told her that Randy had gone in with Gary Gordon, she felt even better. They're hiding somewhere. If anybody could come through it alive, it was those two.

Later that day notification arrived at Fort Bragg of more deaths: Sgt. Earl Fillmore and Master Sgt. Tim "Grizz" Martin. Then there were the horrible images of a dead soldier being dragged through the streets. Wives and parents and siblings were examining newspaper photos and squinting at TV images, trying to determine who the soldier was.

Then word came that Gary Gordon's body had been recovered. But when proof came that Durant was alive and being held captive, Stephanie's hopes soared. Surely they had Randy, too. They just

weren't showing him on camera. She prayed and prayed. She went to the funerals of the other soldiers, sat and grieved with the other wives. One day there were two funerals. Eventually all the missing men except Shughart had been accounted for. All were dead, their bodies horribly mutilated.

Stephanie asked her father to stay with her. Her friends took turns keeping her company. This went on for days. It was hell.

When she saw a car pull into her driveway with a priest inside, she knew.

"They're here, Dad," she said. "Randy's body has been returned and identified."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She was sure. The military discouraged her from viewing Randy's body - and, being a nurse, Stephanie knew why. She sent a friend to Dover, Del., where the body had been flown. When he came back, she asked: "Could you tell it was him?" He shook his head no.

"His body was intact," he told her.

Randy and Stephanie had had the "death talk." That's what the boys called it. Randy told her he wanted to be buried at home in Newville, Pa. At the burial there was such a crush of photographers and reporters that she couldn't spend a few quiet moments alone at the grave to say good-bye. Two of her friends from Commando had to escort her out of the ceremony to keep the press away.

Randy Shughart and Gary Gordon would be awarded the Medal of Honor.

MIKE DURANT'S FEAR of being executed or tortured eased after several days in captivity. After being at the center of that enraged mob on the day he crashed, he mostly feared being discovered by the Somalian public. It was a fear shared by Firimbi.

The "propaganda minister" had clearly grown fond of him. It was something Durant worked at, part of his survival training. The two men were together day and night for a week. Firimbi spoke Italian and Durant spoke some Spanish, languages similar enough for them to minimally communicate.

Firimbi considered Durant a prisoner of war. He believed that by treating the pilot humanely, he would improve the image of Somalis in America upon his release.

The pilot humored his jailer, asking him questions, indulging his whims. For instance, Firimbi loved his khat - the plant Somalis chewed as a stimulant. One day he handed cash to a guard and sent him to purchase more. When the man returned he began dividing the khat into three equal portions, one for himself, Firimbi and another guard.

"No," Firimbi said. "Four."

The guard looked at him quizzically. Firimbi gestured toward Durant. Durant quickly figured out what his jailer was up to. He nodded at the guard, indicating he wanted a cut of khat, too.

When the guard left, Firimbi scooped up the two piles for himself, winking at Durant and flashing an enormous grin.

Firimbi identified so strongly with the pilot that when Durant refused food, he refused food. When Durant couldn't sleep because of his pain, Firimbi couldn't sleep, either. He made Durant promise that when he was released he would tell how well-treated he had been. Durant said he would.

When the helicopters flew over at night, broadcasting, "Your friends are looking for you, Mike Durant," Firimbi asked for a translation. After Durant told him what the words meant, Firimbi complained: "But we treat you so nicely!" A doctor had set Durant's broken leg in a cast. At first he was fed stale MREs (Meals Ready to Eat). Then the woman who owned the house slaughtered a goat and offered him a meal of meat and spaghetti. Durant developed a bad case of diarrhea, which was uncomfortable and embarrassing.

Firimbi helped keep the bedridden pilot clean.

"What do you want?" he kept asking Durant.

"I want a plane ticket to the United States."

"Do you want a radio?" Firimbi asked him.

"Sure," Durant said, and he was given a small black plastic radio with a volume so low he had to hold it up to his ear. That radio became his lifeline. He could hear the BBC World Service, and reports about his

captivity. It was powerfully reassuring to hear those English voices coming from his own world.

After five miserable days in captivity, Durant got visitors. Suddenly the room was cleaned and the bedsheets were changed. Firimbi cleaned him up, redressed his wounds, and gave him a clean shirt and a ma-awis, the wraparound skirt worn by Somalian men. Perfume was sprayed around the room.

Durant's hopes soared. His first visitor was Suzanne Hofstadter, a Norwegian who worked for the International Red Cross. Durant took her hand and held on tight. All she had brought with her were forms with which he could write a letter. In the letter Durant described his injuries, told his family he was doing OK, and asked them to pray for the others. He still didn't know the fate of his crew or Commando soldiers Shughart and Gordon, who had roped down to save him.

He wrote that he was craving a pizza. Then he asked Firimbi if he could write another letter to his buddies at the hangar, and his jailer said yes. He wrote that he was doing OK, and told them not to touch the bottle of Jack Daniels in his rucksack. Durant didn't have much time to think. He was trying to convey in a lighthearted way that he was OK, to lessen their worry for him. At the bottom of this note he wrote, cryptically, "NSDQ."

Later, Red Cross officials, concerned about violating their strict neutrality by passing along what might be a coded message, scratched out the initials.

After Hofstadter left, two reporters were ushered in: Briton Mark Huband of the Guardian and Stephen Smith from the French newspaper Liberation. Huband found the pilot lying flat on his back, bare-chested, obviously injured and in pain. Durant was still choked up from the session with Hofstadter. He had held her hand until the last moment, unwilling to see her leave.

Huband and Smith had brought a recorder. They told him he didn't have to say anything. Huband felt great pity for Durant, and tried to reassure him.

Durant weighed talking to them. He finally agreed to discuss only the things that had happened to him since the crash. He wanted his family and his unit to know as much as possible about what had happened. He described the crash and his capture. Then Huband asked why the

battle had happened, and why so many people had died. Durant said something he would later regret:

"Too many innocent people are getting killed. People are angry because they see civilians getting killed. I don't think anyone who doesn't live here can understand what is going wrong here. Americans mean well. We did try to help. Things have gone wrong."

It was that "Things have gone wrong" line that haunted him after the reporters left. Who was he to pronounce a verdict on the American mission? He should have just said, ``I'm a soldier and I do what I'm told."

He grew depressed. He really did believe things had gone wrong, but he felt he had stepped over a line by saying it.

Durant rallied a day later when he heard his wife Lorrie's voice on the BBC. She had made a statement to the press, which was carried on CNN as well. At the end Lorrie said loudly and firmly: "Like you always say, Mike, Night Stalkers Don't Quit."

This was actually not something Durant said often. It referred to the cryptic initials Durant had penned at the bottom of his note - still visible despite the Red Cross scratches. It was the motto of his unit, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. His message of defiance had gotten through.

WHEN ROBERT OAKLEY arrived in Mogadishu on Oct. 8, Aidid was still in hiding. He met instead with the warlord's clan. He told the Habr Gidr leaders that the U.S. military operation against Aidid was over, and that Task Force Ranger's original mission had ended. The Somalis were skeptical.

"You'll see for yourself over time that it's true," Oakley said. Then he told them that President Clinton wanted Durant released immediately, without conditions. The Somalis were adamant. Task Force Ranger had rounded up 60 or 70 men from their leadership. The top men, including the two most important men taken on Oct. 3, Omar Salad and Mohammed Hassan Awale, were being held in a makeshift prison camp on an island off the coast. Any release of Durant would have to involve a trade. That was the Somalian way.

"I'll do my best to see that these people are released, but I can't promise anything," Oakley said. "I'll even talk to the President about it, but only after you've released Durant."

Oakley was careful to say, ``This is not a threat," but then he laid out a chilling scenario. He offered it as friendly advice.

"I have no plan for this, and I'll do everything I can to prevent it, but what will happen if a few weeks go by and Mr. Durant is not released? Not only will you lose any credit you may get now, but we will decide that we have to rescue him. I guarantee you we are not going to pay or trade for him in any way, shape or form. . . .

"So what we'll decide is we have to rescue him, and whether we have the right place or the wrong place, there's going to be a fight with your people. The minute the guns start again, all restraint on the U.S. side goes. Just look at the stuff coming in here now. An aircraft carrier, tanks, gunships . . . the works. Once the fighting starts, all this pent-up anger is going to be released. This whole part of the city will be destroyed, men, women, children, camels, cats, dogs, goats, donkeys, everything. . . . That would really be tragic for all of us, but that's what will happen."

The Somalis delivered his message and "friendly advice" to Aidid, in hiding, who offered to hand the pilot right over. Oakley asked them to delay for a few hours to give him time to leave the country. He told them to turn Durant over to Howe, and he flew back to Washington.

THERE WAS A PARADE of sorts on the day Durant was released. All of the men from Task Force Ranger and everyone else now based at the hangar turned out to salute him.

He was carried on a litter through hundreds of men in desert fatigues, an IV in his arm, clutching his unit's red beret. It was a day of joy and enormous relief, but also a day of sadness. Durant was the only member of his four-man crew and two Commando defenders to return.

It had been the biggest firefight involving American troops since the Vietnam War. Eighteen Americans dead and 73 wounded. More than 500 Somalis dead and at least a thousand injured. All for the capture of Omar Salad and Mohammed Hassan Awale, two men who were as little known after the fight as they had been before it.

President Clinton would accept Oakley's plea on behalf of the Somalian leaders and order the release several weeks later of every Somali captured by Task Force Ranger.

American soldiers had fought valiantly and well, but the price paid

that day effectively ended America's mission to Somalia. Every man who fought was back home within a month.

Former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin L. Powell, who had approved sending Task Force Ranger to Mogadishu, said in an interview this year: "Bad things happen in war. Nobody did anything wrong militarily in Mogadishu. They had a bad afternoon. No one expected a large number of soldiers to get killed. Is 18 a large number? People didn't start noticing in Vietnam until it was 500 a week."

To this day, many in Mogadishu honor Oct. 3 as Ma-alinti Rangers, or "The Day of the Rangers." They regard it as a national victory. If a victory for either side, it was certainly a Pyrrhic one.

Mohamed Farrah Aidid, code-named ``Yogi the Bear'' by the Americans, was killed in factional fighting in 1996. He died on the same day Garrison retired from the Army, a coincidence the general is said to note with a wink.

Most of the wounded men who fought with Durant had already been flown home by Oct. 14, the day he was released. One of them, Pfc. Clay Othic, a turret gunner who had been shot in the right arm, added a final entry to the diary he kept during the mission. He couldn't write with his right hand, so he scratched out the words with his left hand.

He wrote:

"Sometimes you get the bear. Sometimes the bear gets you!"